

interzone

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The Lady of the CARNELIAS

RICHARD
CALDER

Philip Pullman Interview



DAVID LANGFORD • GARY WESTFAHL • NICK LOWE

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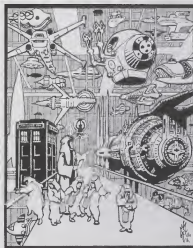
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COMING NEXT MONTH

A little surprise from American writer George Zebrowski; also, three of the UK's brightest newer authors – Tony Ballantyne, Alexander Glass and Dominic Green – all return with good new stories. There will be fiction by other talented writers, plus all our usual features and reviews. So watch out for the December issue of *Interzone*, on sale in late November.





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John Clute
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Interzone
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NOVEMBER 2000

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Dear Editors:

The poll results and Paul Beardsley's letter (*Interzone* 159) make interesting reading. Personally I am surprised that Tanith Lee's "Where Does the Town Go at Night?" didn't top the poll. For me, it is an absolutely amazing piece of work. It's also surprising that a few stories I thought were unremarkable fared so well. And Eric Brown seems to have won with the wrong story. But on the whole I have no great quarrel with the results. I'm not so sure about Beardsley's letter, however. So in the interests of balance here's an opposing view.

First point of contention comes with the dismissal of all parallel-world stories. It is at the core of science fiction to examine the impact of a difference between the world we know and the world as it may become, or could have been. It is perfectly valid to pursue this investigation by imagining parallel worlds rather than future ones. Obviously there must be a point to it. I sympathize with the notion that imagining a parallel world is not an end in itself, but rather a means to an end.

Exactly the same argument can be made for a postmodern approach and/or the inclusion of real-life people (let's not restrict ourselves just to literary figures). On their own, these things achieve nothing. But sometimes real people live amazing lives and there is nothing wrong with writing about them. In doing so we may learn something new about them, their life, and/or human life in general. Again these things are at the heart of science fiction and indeed fiction in general.

Moving on to Beardsley's comments on specific stories: There isn't a lot to argue with regarding the stories he likes. As I recall there was some pretty wacky flow theory in Ben Jeapes's "Go With the Flow," making it more than "merely fun." So it is even better than suggested.

On the other hand, I can easily enthuse about many of the stories Beardsley dislikes. "The Gateway of Eternity" was, I thought, a very satisfying continuation of Stableford's story. He succeeds beyond expectations again, bringing in new elements to make the new instalment fresh and interesting. In this vein Stableford writes at a level that few others can compete with.

"The Sky-Green Blues" was a comparative failure, I admit, but a brave one. Tanith Lee does seem to go in for self-sabotage on occasion. But overall her stories for *IZ* over the last couple of years have been of an astonishing standard and I'm glad I had the chance to see this story as well.

I enjoyed "Angelmakers," "Bug," and "The Flight of the *Oh Carollian*." I also



INTERACTION

enjoyed the "Molly" stories by Francis Amery (i.e. Stableford) although they have probably outstayed their welcome now. I don't agree that people who like *Men in Black/X-Files* are amply catered for by TV and film. People who like *Men in Black* are catered for by, er... the *Men in Black* film. People who, in theory, like *The X-Files* get about five decent episodes in a season. A few stories in *IZ* along the lines of the best *X-Files* episodes would be no bad thing in my view.

Moving on, I liked "Tranquillity" by Mary Soon Lee. Not a "fun" story I admit, but since when is that the criteria for a good story? I also liked "Just Like Eddy" by Kim Newman. I completely disagree with Beardsley when he insists that there is nothing interesting about it. "The Bicycle Net" is a vivid tale, one of my favourites of the year and it is inexplicable to see it described as a "girl loses bicycle" non-event. And "The Rot" was also a favourite. It has a strange melancholy quality to it. It talks about relationships in a way that I completely understand and identify with. That should probably worry me – but sometimes it is good to be worried.

It was great to see *Interzone* notching up its 150th issue last year. And I can agree with Beardsley that we are seeing some great stories in *IZ* this year. Thanks again for doing what you do – publishing quality fiction/non-fiction month after month.

Chris Butler

Hove, East Sussex
chris@pofghan.freeseve.co.uk

New Talent

Dear Editors:

Re. the discussion about new writers – where are the giants of yesteryear? (*IZ* 157, p4) – I also reviewed China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (for *The Spectator*) and took the opportunity in the review to list a whole group of talented "new" writers, including Steve Aylett, whose work looks very impressive to me. My piece sought to alert interested, adult readers to what they were missing. Tim Etchells is another writer I'd add to that list and there's all sorts of praise coming up for Jeff VanderMeer. Could it be that the best imaginative writers, like Iain Sinclair for instance, and of course Ballard, now defy classification? They're virtually the mainstream!

Mike Moorcock

Circle Squared Ranch
Lost Pines, Texas, USA

Westfahl & Ellison

Dear Editors:

Gary Westfahl (*IZ* 159) says that my theory of Harlan Ellison's failure to complete and deliver *Last Dangerous Visions* is simply that Mr Ellison never managed to finish the introductions. That's a pretty reductionist summary! My "theory" in fact amounted to a long essay, meticulously researched and carefully argued, which suggested several reasons for the failure. Nor did I suggest that Mr Ellison is a perfectionist who cannot bring himself to make the culminating brush-stroke. As a writer who claims that he always writes quickly, often writes in public places and invariably submits his first drafts, the one word that can never be applied to Mr Ellison is "perfectionist."

Two things about this non-existent book do remain of interest, and explain why it will never be published: its length and its age.

The length is relevant because by any estimate the word-count is so vast that the book is all but unmanageable in publishing terms. While I was researching my essay, and talking to and corresponding with people who have been involved with *LDV*, the one subject that came up again and again was Mr Ellison's revealing obsession with size. He goes on about it at every opportunity. Several people pointed to the fact that as a writer he is not able to "go the length," i.e. has never completed a full-length novel, so he therefore has no real conception of the economics or dynamics of publishing a large book. One publisher I spoke to, for instance, estimated that it would take

at least six months to copy-edit the text of a book so immense... not to mention the typesetting. These are both practical considerations because most of the *LDV* stories pre-date the use of word processors. Their text is not available digitally. The book would have to be prepared manually, then set by hand: both are time-consuming and expensive these days, not to say unusual.

(The non-digital nature of the text also militates against another theoretical solution for Mr Ellison: to publish the stories online. At some point those stories are going to have to be copy-edited, keyed in, then proofread. Hundreds of thousands of words!)

The book's age – the project is now in its fourth decade – means that an embarrassing number of Mr Ellison's contributors have died while waiting to see their work published. On death, the ownership of copyright material automatically devolves to the writer's estate and unless they are renewed existing contracts become void. Mr Ellison was prodded unwelcomely by the sharp end of this when Cordwainer Smith's *LDV* story was published by NESFA: the ownership of the copyright had passed to Paul Linebarger's estate who authorized the story's publication. Unless Mr Ellison has swiftly renewed his rights with the estates of all those allegedly contented but inconveniently dead authors, he will be in breach of copyright if he publishes the stories.

As I said in my essay, the world of publishing is full of stories about books that fail to get published for one reason or another. It's a commonplace; no blame or odium attaches. Mr Ellison would gain rather than lose face if he were to walk away in good grace from his predicament.

If it's commonplace, then why does it matter? Why is it interesting enough for (e.g.) Westfahl to write a column about it, and me to write and publish an immense essay? Simply because other writers are involved. It's not Mr Ellison's work that is being hoarded: it's the work of at least 200 other writers, many of whom were young and starting out when Mr Ellison acquired their stories. This casts a different light on Mr Ellison's claims to be someone who nurtures young talent.

Christopher Priest

Hastings, East Sussex
ChrPr997@aol.com
www.christopher-priest.co.uk

Dear Editors:

I've just seen the September issue with the Gary Westfahl article on *Last Dangerous Visions*. Does Westfahl really believe this, or is he just trying to poke a stick through the bars of Harlan's cage? I suspect the latter. If the result is that Harlan proves him a

liar by publishing the book, all well and good. Otherwise I don't find Westfahl's protestations of disinterested objectivity any more convincing than Christopher Priest's.

Yes, there are early and immature stories in *LDV* by writers who have gone on to have extensive careers. Can you really blame Harlan for buying their early stories? He bought Octavia Butler's second story. Obviously his faith in her career potential was no more misplaced than it was in John Sladek, whose first story is in the original *Dangerous Visions*. But does anybody really believe that such figures as Leigh Brackett and Edmond Hamilton (in their only collaboration, combining their most famous series in "Stark and the Star Kings") or Avram Davidson or Edgar Pangborn or Jack Williamson or Clifford Simak took this opportunity to unload their junk on Harlan? Back about 1974, the chance to be published in *LDV* must have seemed very inviting indeed. I cannot believe that most authors would have taken it lightly. What stories we've seen which were sprung from *LDV* and subsequently published (the Moorcock and the Cordwainer Smith, for instance) were not bad at all.

It's far more plausible to suggest that Harlan was like a kid in a toy-store who couldn't make up his mind and wanted everything. So he didn't stop. He had to have every famous writer left in the universe who was not in the previous two volumes. The book became too large to publish. For whatever reason, the project got delayed beyond the point of no return. It's not "dangerous" any more, much less cutting-edge. It therefore lost its commercial viability. If we ever do get to read it, it will be more archaeology than a revolution.

To be charitable, Gary Westfahl must have intended this column satirically.

Darrell Schweitzer
Philadelpha, PA, USA

Dear Editors:

I'm not a fan of Gary Westfahl's columns at the best of times, but he usually has something contentious to say at least, and I was quite looking forward to his piece on *Last Dangerous Visions* in *IZ* 159 – but the item itself says nothing of value in the debate and is more of an attack on Chris Priest and *The Last Deadloss Visions* than it is on Ellison and the "other" *LDV*.

I don't have a copy of *Deadloss* to hand, but Chris's main conclusion is certainly that the moment has now passed and that, even if Ellison got his act together, the stories would be too old to make the project worthwhile, which seems to be exactly the same conclusion Westfahl reaches. What is

even more bizarre is that Westfahl talks as if we can do nothing but speculate about the quality of these stories, blithely ignoring that a number of them have already been published elsewhere (including at least two in *Interzone*). (The two stories in question were "Dark Night in Toyland" by Bob Shaw (*IZ* 26) and "A Journey South" by John Christopher (*IZ* 44) – Editor.)

An article that tracked down all the stories that had been published and assessed what the quality of the book might have been had it appeared in 1973 might have been interesting, but even then this is purely fanzine material – the story is almost 30 years old and has been done to death (much more thoroughly) elsewhere and I really don't think anybody cares any more.

Phil Stephensen-Payne
philsp@compuserve.com

Mutant Popcorn

Dear Editors:

A quick note to Nick Lowe. I was impressed with your analysis of *Chicken Run* (*IZ* 159). Of course, the "meat is murder" theme is not a new departure for Nick Park – if you recollect, *A Close Shave* was set against a background of rustled sheep ending up as meat pies. And is it any coincidence that Wallace and Gromit both appear to be vegetarians (though not vegans, with that liking for cheese)?

(I feel an urge to write a serious critical article for *Foundation* entitled "Wallace and Gromit – The Inheritors of Dan Dare: The SF Films of Nick Park," so I suppose it's time I had a lie down in a darkened room...)

On a recent visit to Dresden, I was delighted to see that *Chicken Run* was showing there (and apparently doing rather well). What this says about your "Auschwitz with pies" hypothesis is sobering. I was delighted to see how the title translated – in Germany, the film is called *Hennen Rennen*, which is almost an exact translation as well as sounding suitably silly in English and German.

(For linguists: "Hennen" = hens [not to be confused with "Huhne" = chickens, but which looks as if it's from the same root] and "Rennen" = to run [a race, etc].)

Of course, it misses out on the pun of the English title, but two out of three ain't bad!

Robert Day
Fillongley, Coventry
rday@madafish.com

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stood by her graveside amongst a dozen or so other mourners. The glass coffin – showered with that horrid bloom, the carnelia – was lowered slowly into the earth. Though dis-tempered by a riot of reds, pinks and magentas, enough glass remained uncontaminated to reveal that, shortly before death, she had become like that flower herself, her flesh a tangled bouquet of thorny vines, exploded calyxes and dank, suppurating petals. Death is the great promise of life, she had said. Its reconciliation with otherness. The febrile air of an unusually hot Parisian summer filled my lungs, choking me with its dissonant correlative to grief. How could I believe in that promise after all that had occurred? We are born alone. We die alone. And between “you” and “me” there is always the insurmountable gulf. Like those that, looking up at the night sky, Violetta would say lay between, not just the planets and stars, but the spheres of pre-existence and afterlife, the past, present and future. “Life is a discontinuous phenomenon,” she would conclude. “As bleak as those voids that I have traversed merely so, it now seems to me, I could be with you. And as full of strangeness and terror.” But she could be with me no longer, nor I with her. The gulf had opened up for all eternity. About me, all was void. And strangeness. And terror such as I had never known. The terror of infinite loneliness. Of separation, irrevocable, complete.

I remembered when we had first met, a few months ago. And if the encounter had, as she often suggested, been no more than a dream, as uncertain as memory itself, then I clove to it still. For dream or no, it was the only substantiality that my life was ever likely to possess.



I had been invited to the Théâtre Nationale de l’Opéra to see a staging of an *opera buffa* inspired by the life of my paternal grandfather, Richard Pike the Fifth, the infamous revolutionary. I had not been informed that the almost equally infamous courtesan, Violetta Valery, would also be attending.

“Ah, so you are called Richard as well, then?” she had said, looking up from her programme, after we had been introduced. She spoke my mother tongue prettily, with only a trace of an accent. Nothing unusual in a world where languages other than English were virtually extinct. But in Paris – citadel of some of the world’s last verbal chauvinists – surprising, nevertheless. “Everything is repeating itself,” she added. “Or so our *philosophes* say. Ideas, fictions, even history. But I had not thought” – and her generous lips parted in a smile that was too arch to be kind, but too coy to be completely unfeeling – “that God’s grand design for *l’éternel retour* might include a man’s Christian name within its purview.”

Our host, the Director, retired discreetly to speak with his other guests. I wondered if she was his mistress, or belonged, for the time being, to one of the other men who

circulated about the box: industrialists, landowners, civil servants, prelates and the usual sprinkling of idle rich. I seemed to detect, amongst their number, a few meaningful exchanges; and it occurred to me that I might be the subject of some elaborate joke. A joke made at the expense of my dispossession. The fact that I could never afford such a woman as Violetta Valery myself.

“A name?” I said, darting vicious glances at those who potentially mocked. “Like God I believe I do not care for very much at all. Certainly nothing for a *name*.” I strove to ignore the haughty looks that the preening scrum of men-about-town returned, and concentrated solely upon my interlocutor’s face.

“Oh,” she said, still smiling. “But I had heard different.” I affected coolness, boredom, even. It was difficult. For if, along with the other guests, she secretly laughed at me, she was still the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

“But it is true,” I said, with a shrug of conciliation. “The first-born males are always named Richard. Not because our line is so alike. But because we labour under the same curse. And have done for seven generations.”

“The rumours, then, are equally true?” she said. “That your family has *ore blood* in its veins?”

I bridled. “How disarmingly candid,” I began. But then bit my tongue. Stung as I was by the blatancy of her allusion, I knew I had, by citing the family curse, raised the issue of my polluted heritage myself. I could hardly rebuke her for taking the proffered bait.

“There are some,” she continued, “who believe that a woman like me is as defiled. Like you, Monsieur, I am sometimes called a witch.”

“A witch,” I murmured, raising a questioning eyebrow. “Indeed, Madame’s powers of bewitchment are legendary. But I cannot believe any man would be so low as to suggest that you were of compromised stock.” Hardly conscious of where the words came from, and unmindful of how absurd they might seem, I concluded: “I would kill such a man.”

Before I could even think to stop her, or marvel at how she flouted propriety, she touched my cheek. The long, feline nails caressed my squamous flesh, and then I felt the softness of the hand itself; and its contact would have been warm, sisterly, almost maternal, if it had not carried a sexual charge flagrant in the extreme. I knew then that, though she evinced no obvious signs of hereditary pollution, she was, like me, a creature of the perverse, if unlike any such one I had seen before, or even suspected to exist. The fact that she was a woman of the *demi-monde* had nothing to do with it. Her whole being was informed by the dark energy of the Netherworld.

She took her hand away, and I felt my cheek flush invisibly under its scalelike epithelium. “I have been looking forward to meeting you, Monsieur Pike. Or should I say, Lord Soho?”

“That title is no more,” I said, gripping the brass handrail and steadying myself. During the few minutes of our encounter I had gone from a man overly suspicious to one about to cast all doubt aside. And I was afraid. Afraid that – despite my recent avowal – I was confronted by something that I *did* care about; cared for more than my lineage, and feared far, far more than those danger-

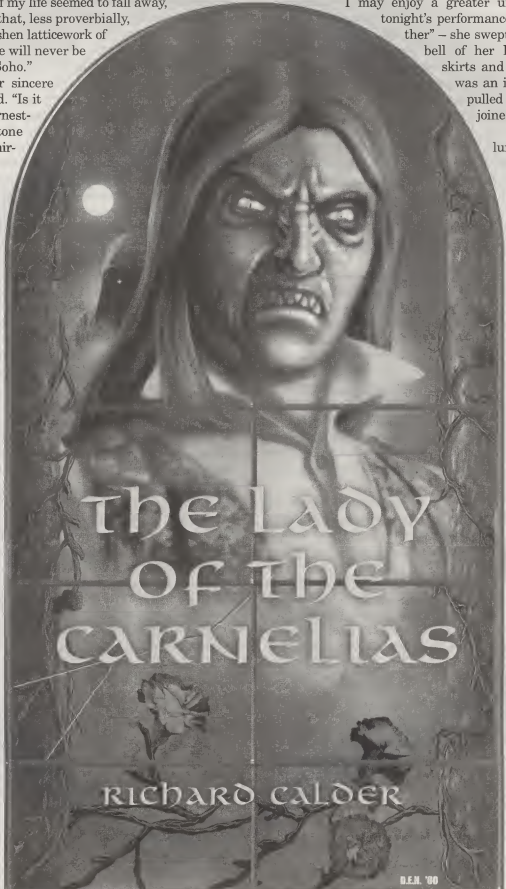
ous abstracts such as justice and freedom that, during my long years of exile, I had vigorously campaigned to have remitted to the trashcan of history. The emotion I felt, if not wholly novel, was so rare that the accumulated disappointments of my life seemed to fall away, like the scales that, less proverbially, made a grim, ashen latticework of my skin. "There will never be another Lord Soho."

"Is that your sincere belief?" she said. "Is it really?" The earnestness of her tone suggested the mir-

acle that perhaps she cared, too. And my distraction was such that I did not, for the moment, question the wherefore. "But come," she continued, "the curtain is about to go up. And I want you to tell me all about your family so that

I may enjoy a greater understanding of tonight's performance. Your grandfather" – she swept aside the great bell of her long, opalescent skirts and sat down – "he was an incunabulum?" I pulled back a chair and joined her.

"An incunabulum, yes," I said,



THE LADY OF THE CARNELIAS

RICHARD CALDER

D.E.N. '00

"an embodiment of the intellectual life of our distant forebears. A living artefact."

We sat at the front of the box, below us the bejewelled ranks of the City of Light, the orchestra and proscenium arching away in a rapture of glass and iron, recalling me to the St Pancras of my boyhood and youth, and the recently-built, and even more magnificent, St Lazare.

"Yes, of course," she said, "I have read of the incunabula. When civilization died, books were burned, artefacts destroyed, but their ghostly, intelligible structures lived on."

"They transmigrated," I said. "And now, through the medium of the incunabula, the Forms use us for their own ends."

"But you do not fear the incunabula, surely? The Forms they embody reflect an ideal. It is through them, and through them alone, that we have begun to rediscover the glories of the Ancients."

"I do not fear them," I said. "I oppose them. Not because I am superstitious, but because I hope I am rational. A Form, imprisoned in matter, is always but a dim reflection of the Ideal. And these are mutant Forms. They are not beautiful. They are not true. Neither do they any longer require an artist, or man of science, to body them forth. In parasitizing the deepest levels of the human mind, these entities have become autonomous." I paused, my lip curling with rancour. "Fear incunabula? Incunabula are no more than vectors, familiars, human beings who are possessed. But, nevertheless, they are *dangerous*. Wherever they go, their radiant intellectual will distort space-time until it harmonizes with the ancient pattern that lies at their core."

"But," she said, with a simplicity that might have been interpreted as reproach, if it had not been for the girlish ingenuousness that shone from her eyes, "are you not too an incunabulum?"

The gaslight dimmed. She lifted her lorgnette. For a moment, her profile reminded me of some legendary beauty from a masked ball – and not of Venice or Rome, Prague or Muscovy, but from beyond, a place more distant, perhaps, than even fabled Cathay.

"Just because my grandfather—" I floundered. My father was normal. But I had always feared that I had inherited much, perhaps over much, from Richard Pike the Fifth, the family iconoclast. And I felt a rush of something akin to shame. "No, no, I don't know what I am. I do have goblin blood, of course. The first Richard Pike took a goblin woman for a paramour. But I know nothing else about myself."

She rested the lorgnette in her lap's pearly *mousseline-de-soie*. The darkness deepened still more. I felt my usual self-restraint, along with my shame, vanish, as if I were ensconced in the gloom of my own apartment in the early hours of morning, alone, oblivious to the burdens of past, present and future, and slipping into the blissful vacancy of sleep. "Yes, I know nothing, except that I have wished, and wished for as long as I can recall, to slough off the responsibilities my family has imposed on me. You realize—" I took a deep breath; began again, more quietly, for in the passion of mounting my hobbyhorse I was becoming overly excited, and somewhat loud. "You realize that

my father has taken the whole of Essex? That, after he takes London, all Europa will be swamped by a tidal wave of manumission that will destroy the work of the last few hundred years? Slavery is the bedrock on which human culture has been rebuilt. Without it—" I swept my hand through the air to indicate the reversal in mankind's fortunes that would follow.

"*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*?" she enquired, coolly.

"Barbarism comparable to that of the days of the interregnum," I asserted, with a happy nod of agreement. I leaned back in my chair, swallowed and looked away into the auditorium's shadows. I had begun to sound like one of my pamphlets. To ape the gestures of a demagogue. It was perhaps not the most fitting way to win the respect and admiration of a beautiful woman. "I can no longer have anything to do with my family," I continued. "Nor with my country. Not as it presently is. Not if I am to retain a conscience." Family and country, of course, no longer wished to have anything to do with me, either. The rants that bore my assumed name were execrated. Even Londoners, whose vested interests lay in the maintenance of a slave state, thought my ideas beyond the pale. "My name is Germont," I said, with finality. "I wish for no other."

"Germont it is. But I tell you, Germont, do not believe that there are not others who may grasp the elements of your selfhood better than *you* do." She leaned towards me, staring up from beneath long, velvet lashes. And if her eyes – the lids inclined sharply upwards towards the brows on the temple side – were typically those of a *femme fatale*, and spoke of a nature wanton and cruel, then I understood that this was only due to my lingering inability to grasp their essential, and overpoweringly marvellous, non-humanity. A quality less wicked than amorality, or, at least, as beyond my own poor, stricken morality as I prided myself in being above the general fray. The eyes narrowed, reinforcing the oriental character that, until then, had been only suggested by the deviant lids. "I know who you are." And, in a moment of revelation, I knew she knew. Knew more about me than anyone had ever done. And I felt that, at any moment, I was due to partake of similar insight, and know her as thoroughly.

The orchestra struck up with the overture. "We must talk more, Germont."

"Yes," I said, benumbed by what had seemed her transfiguration. "I must learn about you. I must learn *everything* about you."

For the first time since we had been introduced, her smile vanished. "Be assured: you will." One side of her powdered face caught the illumination of a remaining gaslight, and she seemed to glow, pale as some night bloom drenched with phosphorescent dew, a bloom such as might be found amongst the dead forests of my own lost Darkling Isle.

I was so entranced that I had not even once taken more than a cursory note of her corsage: the red-and-pink bloom that so resembled an obscene wound: the night bloom that paralleled her own ineffable beauty, and whose wet, flesh-like petals I had seen reflected in her eyes: my first carnelia.

The performance concluded. As we were leaving the box, I saw, to my pleasure, that I had provoked the surprise and wonder of the other men. If a joke had been intended that evening, I began to feel that it had rebounded. I had been chosen. And though cynical enough to know that I was, perhaps, being used – though just how, I could not fathom, for my straitened circumstances were well known – I retained enough youthful spirits, vanity and arrogance, to believe that the beautiful woman on my arm might simply be my due.

My barouche passed down the Boulevard St Germain. To either side of that bleak, depopulated canyon rose the colossal ruins of the Latin Quarter, one of Paris's oldest *quartiers*, and one through which few chose to pass, except it be by necessity. Its crumbling edifices might have been twin mountain ranges composed of glistening, black soap for whom a slow percolation of water had effected a deterioration that had stopped just short of complete deliquescence. Might have been, that is, if its decay had not precipitated effusions that one most readily associates with a graveyard rather than a bathhouse. Like many of Paris's less salubrious environs, the masonry here had been hewn from those forests of living stone that the Netherworld had loosed upon Earth-Above during its long war with humanity. Those forests had died, leaving only petrified remains. And in the Latin Quarter it had seemed, at first, that the stone had died in like manner. But an unknown factor in the construction process had initiated a process akin to putrefaction. The stone rotted; and not like wood, or some analogous compound; the stone rotted like *meat*. Eaten from within like gigantic carcasses, riddled with strange, wormy growths, a brief *rigor mortis* had given way to general corruption, until each building's skin had burst and the dark corrosive sap that it had long harboured could be seen coursing down St Germain's façades. The mephitic odour that would sometimes waft through the neighbourhood, if tonight palliated by summer weather that had gone some way to drying out the sweaty, cadaverous stone, was unbelievable; almost as unbelievable as the fact that people lived in these ruins, people as rank and unsympathetic as the less sentient life harboured within the architecture's viscid walls: the dreaded *apaches*.

I am not a brave man, but the fear I had of discovering that Madame Valery might be toying with me abrogated the greater, and surely more sensible, fear, that the *apaches* familiarly generated. When I had earlier put it to her that we might share the late supper that would have been prepared by my maid, implying – by way of those submissive, feathery little inflections of the voice that I had picked up from childhood associations with thralls – that I did not expect, indeed could not hope for, anything more, she had accepted, even though she must have known that I did indeed hope for something more. But before I could further reflect upon my absurd good fortune, the carriage slewed to a shrieking halt, and an inarticulate cry from the coachman alerted me that we

had, perhaps, either run over some unfortunate drunk, or fallen victim to the Latin Quarter's rapacious denizens.

"Germont?"

I raised a hand to still her. I reckoned I knew the unreconstructed parts of the city better than most, and did not want our safety compromised by a kept woman's hysterics; a woman who, no matter how much she had bewitched me, could, in the final analysis, I knew, be trusted as little as the next human female.

I girded myself, trying to ignore the hooting and hollering that emanated from the gelatinous warrens of dens and lairs, and peered out of the window.

The street was like pitch. Ahead, almost directly in front of the horses, stood a cloaked figure, its outline picked out by the glare of the gig-lamps. The figure was impassive. But it seemed to exude a mysterious vitality. Shadows, as black, but no darker than its own shrouded form, swirled across the otherwise deserted cobbles, as if the figure imposed some kind of hyper-kineticism upon the very darkness. A hand reached out, frozen in that imperious and universal gesture to stop that, if it had not been for the quick wits of my coachman, would have proved an improvident, indeed fatal, gamble. The figure's head – cowed in the sable cloth that covered the body – turned, and invisible eyes seemed to lock upon my own. The figure advanced. So smoothly did it move over the cobbles that whatever legs were concealed beneath the cloak might have been attached to wheels. Wheels muffled so effectively as to make them utterly silent.

I slipped a hand under the moleskin lapel of my frock-coat and found the pearl-handled paper-knife I habitually carried in the inside breast pocket, less for cutting the leaves of books, or opening letters on the wing, as it were, than for self-defence. On several occasions it had proved an effective pseudo-weapon, warding off the attentions of drunks, hooligans and political opponents. Reassured, I left it in place, to be called upon if the extremity of the situation demanded it.

"It's all right," I said, calling up to my man. "Let me talk to him." My driver kept a firearm beneath the coach box; I didn't want him discharging it in a blind panic. Especially since I was almost certain of who it was that approached.

Madame Valery had already taken off her necklace and rings in preparation to appeasing her robbers with as much expeditiousness as circumstances might allow. I leaned forward, almost thinking to touch her, or in some other way assuage her fear. But she was still the great courtesan, and I was still the impecunious *émigré*. "He's not *apache*," I said in a whisper. "I'm sure of it. Stay here while I go and find out what he wants."

I opened the door and jumped out. The man – his identity, as much as his gender, becoming quite unmistakable, now – had reached the carriage, and stood but a few feet away, mercifully out of Madame Valery's line of sight. "Melchezidek?"

The cowl was thrown back to reveal the face of my father's aide-de-camp.

He was old, they said. Very old. And, in truth, his face

was like that of the old gentleman himself. His skin was like pewter. And horns – those clichés of the diabolical – rose from his scaly head. His argent hair was like spun glass. And his saurian complexion made my own seem almost human. It was rumoured that, beneath that cloak, he sported the vestiges of a pointed tail. And, perhaps, for all I knew, cloven feet, too, and a multitude of other attributes that revealed him to be, if not a scion of the Netherworld, then a cousin-german.

“Good evening, Master Pike,” said the old devil.

“You again? And what news have you brought from father this time, lickspittle?”

“Come home, Master Pike. The life you lead here—”

“The life I *choose*.” I began to wring my hands as involuntarily as if I had been a fly. And then I grinned, relaxing just enough to relish the taste of bile in my mouth, such an epicurean had I become, during my years of exile, of acrimiousness. “And what awaits me at home? Vilification? Sanctimony? The rights of man, eternal, inalienable, trumpeted in my ear from dawn to dusk? Tell my father, tell him—”

“I am not here,” the half-human interrupted, “To argue natural law, or whether such doctrine does or does not recognize the legitimacy of slavery, but to tell you that you are in danger.”

“From father?” I choked back a laugh. “You astonish me, Melchizedek.”

“What I say now has nothing to do with your father. I have been on this Earth a long time, Master Pike. Above it, and below it. I have seen many things. And in you I see disaster. I have had dreams, Master Pike. Dreams of you. You fear the past. In particular, its concepts of individual freedom. The release that it implies of certain psychic energies, so repressed these last 4,000 or so years. You fear your childhood, your country, your responsibilities, your fate. But I say to you it is not the past you must fear. No; fear instead the *future*.”

“I’m to fear the future, eh? Oh Melchizedek, can’t you do better than that?”

But with that, the witch turned upon his heels. I watched his measured progress as he proceeded down the middle of the road, away from us, as if retracing his steps along the arrow of time that, tonight, had briefly bisected with my own, leaving futurity to me in a manner that implied I was welcome to it. Very soon he became again, not a man, and less a demon, but rather an uncertain figure about whom the shadows danced, then coalesced, shrouding him, until he and the darkness were as one.

I heaved myself up into the carriage and sat down. Madame Valery looked away, frowning, engaged in a detached, somewhat schoolgirlish contemplation of the monstrous architecture that surrounded us.

“Did we really have to come this way, Germont?”

“My family has accrued wealth, Madame, much wealth, but I share little of it. That is why I live where I do. St Germain, I am afraid, is the only route to and from the Ile de la Cité.” My bewildered companion’s gaze remained fixed on the putrefying ranges that rose on either side of our defile. I gave the driver his order. Soon, we were con-

tinuing on our way. “The man who stopped us,” I continued. “It was all due to a misunderstanding. There is no need for further concern.” But until we reached the Ile de la Cité she remained silent, like a child lost in perusal of the illustrations contained in a book of cruel fairy tales, or one, rather – as I was soon to find out – lost to herself.



Madame Valery and I sat outside, enjoying the cool breeze. It blew in from the west, made its way over the Seine and the ruins of Notre-Dame, and briefly decamped on my balcony before bidding an adieu, to continue on its journey towards Germania, the seat of Holy Empire, and the wildernesses of the savage, unconverted East.

“My father is misguided,” I said, in answer to her queries. She pulled her mantle more tightly about herself and, with a shiver that ran from her shoulders to the trim ankles that showed below her skirt’s voluminous hem, leaned back in her wickerwork chair and cast her gaze upward, deep into the night. It was one o’clock and the breeze had come to be invested with a certain keenness. But she still listened. I was sure of it. Sure that she hung upon my every word. “For thousands of years, those denied access to civilized life, and confined beyond the boundaries of the world’s great walled cities, had been pacified by a chemical programme of psychic castration in order to prevent organized rebellion or unrest. It was only when the Netherworld, wishing to sow discord on Earth-Above, discovered and disseminated a universal antidote to what had become known as ‘simplification’ that the programme was gradually abandoned. But long before it was abandoned the Darkling Isle’s disenfranchised masses had willingly accepted their status as slaves. Whether this was due to their cultural imperatives, the ‘slave culture’ that they had evolved, or whether factors associated with the long-term effect of the drugs that had permeated their food and water for generations had had the prevalent influence, it is difficult to determine. But the general manumission, both legal and psychological, that my grandfather, and now my father, is imposing upon the country is leading to that very unrest that ‘simplification’ had, for so long, precluded. In time, I predict, it will lead to the destruction of our culture. To internecine warfare. Yes, that end of days will parallel the coming of the perverse, when, towards the end of the 21st century, mankind chose to forget how to interpret the objective world and instead embraced the dark forces of the cosmic libido!”

I paused, conscious that I sounded like some callow student who hopes to impress his new girl with an ill-conceived and somewhat naïve rant on how *unfair* life is. I had long known that I could not escape my past. But sometimes, when I stood revealed to myself as less the seasoned politico than a malcontent whose resentments were rooted in adolescent pique, I was abashed, if only for so long as it took to explain away the epiphany as weakness, a surrender to my shadow-self.

“The coming of the perverse,” she said, her words echo-

ing my passion with all the breathlessness of a communicant's response. "Yes. Are we really emerging from 4,000 years of chaos to find ourselves merely at the mercy of another dark age? One that resurrects the dead language of *natural law* and the fallaciously subtle arguments of *conscience* to wreak changes in our society that, however it may flatter our newly-revived powers of reason to assimilate them, will, in the end, have us repenting at leisure?"

I tried to mask my surprise. She had done more than excuse my inclination to demagoguery; she had understood me in a way few others had the courage to do. I got up and walked to the balcony's edge. There, my arms outstretched and grasping the filigree balustrade so firmly that my knuckles grew as white as the moon, I decided to test her further, hardly daring to conceive that this beautiful, notorious woman might have chosen to associate with me because of the sympathetic vibrations I set up in her soul.

"You have read my work?" Far off, I heard the whistle of a train, a sound that always summoned up images I associated with childhood, when the great steam locomotives that ploughed through the knotted wastes of England had still been a novelty, and I had been happily unaware of just how much the Darkling Isle was to change.

"Of course. Where I come from, *everyone* has read your work."

I turned. "Where you come from?" I gazed down at her, quizzically.

"There are some who disagree with your arguments, of course. Just as there are here. People like your grandfather, and now your father, it seems, who say that slavery has no foundation, either in societal terms, or as a matter of evolved human psychobiology. It is a construct, they argue, that is as much an article of bad faith as the paradigms adopted by the tribes of the perverse." Flushed with ardour, she took a deep breath. Her bosom heaved. "But I have never believed in such arguments. I, like you, Germont, have always known the truth." I was unable to prevent myself from breaking out in a boyish grin. "Your critics question what to me has always been obvious: that, at this point in time, civilization may be rediscovered only at the expense of a small body of human beings holding the rest of mankind in thrall." It was her turn to smile. And how girlish was the transformation she effected upon herself, the left cheek dimpling prettily as her lips parted to reveal perfect little rows of teeth.

I shuddered, turned away and looked down at my knuckles afresh; saw them whiten the more, until they became like the perfect enamel that lined Madame Valery's mouth. "Four thousand years of darkness against the 400 years that represent the human renaissance," I said, as if in a dream. "Yes, slavery seems a small price to pay." I filled my lungs to capacity and scanned the horizon. Despite the unreconstructed slum-quarters of the Latin Quarter and Montparnasse, Paris was a glory of soaring towers. Everywhere, boulevards glittered with dance halls, hotels, cafés and emporia. Screwing up my eyes, I focused on the city walls, and

beyond, where the reminders of barbarism, in the form of dead, twisted trees and vegetation, covered the Earth's still unreclaimed wastes. And I thought upon the filled-in adits that dotted those wastes and which led below the Earth's surface; of the vast, subterranean caverns of the Netherworld, last redoubt of the perverse, whose buried spirit I often felt rise up within myself, and which I had been all my life at such pains to expunge.

I emptied my lungs in a great sigh. "It is only by maintaining the purely human status quo of the last 400 years," I continued, "that we can hope to remain human. It is the only way we can keep the perverse in check. We have been given this wonderful opportunity, don't you see?" I raised my hands, as if I were addressing the entire population of Paris. "Because of various random factors, such as 'simplification' and the evolution of a slave culture, which, but for outside interference, has had thralls gladly accept their abject condition, we keep the perverse itself in thrall. For it is the slaves, *our* slaves, who, living outside the world's cities, have, over millennia, interbred with all manner of perverse creatures. Rat people, snake people, cat people, insect people. Bred with the creatures those tribes became when they sought refuge from a resurgent humanity under the Earth: the orcs whose blood contaminates even my own veins! The thralls are in truth the last vestiges of the perverse on Earth-Above. It is *imperative* we control them."

"Ah," she exclaimed, "you really *would* be Lord Soho, I see!"

"I told you, that title is—"

"Lost. Yes, I know. Your ancestors were dispossessed and sent to live outside London's walls. And all because of their polluted blood. But control is your darling, is it not? Of the world, and perhaps, yourself? Oh, Germont. Be Lord Soho. Be the proud lord you were born to be!"

I heard the clipping of high-heels over tiles and spun about. My maidservant, Musyne, brought out two brandy balloons, cognac, chocolates and a selection of my best, handmade cigarillos. Madame Valery's eyes never left her. When Musyne had deposited the silver tray on our little folding table and disappeared back into the apartment, she spoke again. "That girl: she was the cause of your exile, wasn't she?" She half turned in her chair, her eyes trained upon the darkness of the interior, as if she desecrated things there that she did not wish to see, but was compelled to. "A slave."

"Yes," I said, walking a little sheepishly back to my chair and slumping down. "A slave." Musyne had been the flashpoint of my life, and, if not the cause, had certainly provided the excuse I had needed to impose upon myself the conditions of self-exile. "But between her and me there is no longer—" *No longer*, I had meant to conclude, if I had not felt suddenly so utterly exhausted with life, *no longer a connection*.

"But she is very pretty."

"Yes," I said, annoyed. The telling way in which she had enunciated that "pretty" rankled. I had had Musyne's age, both mental and physical, arrested, in order that she forever resemble the young woman that I had once thought I had been in love with. But love dies,

dies sometimes even before obsession, and the years, if leaving my maid untouched, had worked their evil upon my soul. Love, like so many things that belonged to my past, had disintegrated, like a pressed flower exposed to the raw air of a harder, more bitter clime. "But that was many years ago. When I believed that it was possible that love and passion might not be doomed to be always distinct and irreconcilable."

I poured her a measure of cognac.

"And so," she said, as she accepted her balloon and peered into it while swirling its dark red contents about, first clockwise, then

ywiddershins. "Not knowing who you were, and perhaps, not caring to find out, you ran away to France." I inclined my head in sad acknowledgement. She had learnt much, it seemed, from those who still remembered the wild-eyed young man who had entered their drawing-rooms only to summarily demand that France should declare war on his native land. "You ran to Paris, where a man may still own a slave, or even breed them, with impunity. You ran away for love." And her expression modulated into one I had first seen at the opera, its frank worldliness diluted by simple, common feeling. It seemed to suggest that life might not be always so contradictory as it had been hitherto; that – though I could not help but balk a little at the sheer ridiculousness of the hypothesis – love might exist outside the exigencies of power. "I am impertinent, perhaps," she continued. "But I hope you will believe me if I say I empathize. I too have run away." She looked up at the night sky. "Where I come from, there is also revolution. At the end of time, where the spheres of pre-existence meld with those of the afterlife, and past, present and future are one, we have our own cursed abolitionists."

It was at this point, I think, that the first dim alarm reverberated through my consciousness. "I'm sorry – what do you mean?"

"I speak of those who seek to undermine a happiness that it has taken the multiverse an eternity to achieve." Before I could make another appeal for clarification she coughed, violently.

"Madame Valery, are you all right?"

Except for two livid dots, that punctuated her cheeks like dabs of paint on a porcelain doll, the colour had left her face. She pulled a small handkerchief from her purse and held it to her mouth. She coughed again, this time with even greater violence, then leaned back in her chair, as if the blood had been drained, not only from her cheeks, but her entire cardio-vascular system. She took the handkerchief away from her mouth and quickly replaced it in her purse; but not quickly or surreptitiously enough to disguise its dark arterial stain.

"Yes, where I come from," she said, "men and women consider you their messiah and take your word as that of God's own. I suppose" – her smile returned, and a little of her colour; but both seemed equally unhealthy; her cheeks became hectic, and the mouth broadened into a lively, red crescent of manic delight – I suppose I should tell you the truth. *I am from the future.*"

I looked away, up, up, into the starlit firmament. Alarm, dim no longer, seemed to fill the entire night. I

gripped the balustrade. Again, my knuckles whitened. Like her teeth. Like her face. Like the moon that, quite unexpectedly, seemed to have left its trammelled course and revealed its dark side.

Was this why the other men in the box had exchanged those secret little smiles? Because they had known I was subject to the attentions of a woman whose sanity had become questionable? I remembered Melchizedek's veiled threat: "*It is not the past you must fear. No; fear instead the future.*" Had he, mocking devil, known too?

"It is late, Madame Valery," I said, not daring to look at her. "Perhaps –"

She began to giggle. "Oh yes, where I come from, that is, the Omega Point, we have all read your pamphlets. You are our hero. Our God."

"My carriage, Madame Valery, is at your disposal. It might be better if –" I heard a rustle of skirts. There was a catch in her voice, as the infantile fit of laughter threatened to metamorphose into an equally grotesque unleashing of tears. And then, after a long diminuendo, silence.

When I at last turned about, she had gone.

I found that she had left her corsage on the table. A little card embossed with her name and address lay on top of it. Picking it up, I saw that, before leaving, she had hastily scrawled out an invitation to her Thursday evening salon, and underneath it the words **YOU ARE MY SLAVE AND I AM YOURS**.

After breakfast, I stood before my cheval-glass, naked, wincing at a fresh contemplation of my ugliness. As we Pikes grow older, it is said, so do we grow more corrupt. I was of middling years. And corruption, I liked to think, was in equipoise with my finer qualities. But my outward aspect belied this moral homeostasis. The gnarled, embittered old man I would soon become, stared back, accusingly.

Few of my ancestors, I hazarded, had cut so grim a figure. If we Pikes grew corrupt with age, then so, it seemed, did we degenerate with each new siring of the line, despite the care that my father, grandfather, and, as far as I knew, his father's father's father, had taken to invest their seed in fully-human women, in the hope, I suppose, that some kind of hereditary compound interest would at last purify and release our family from its curse. I had no horns. No tail. No claws. No bat-like wings. But, sad to say, I otherwise approximated the appearance of those creatures who presumably still populated the Earth's depths, and whose demoniacal aspects could be witnessed amongst the reliefs and statuary of Notre-Dame and Sacré-Coeur.

Yet Musyne had always found me personable. Musyne had always adored me.

"Over there," I said, as she entered the bedchamber pushing a trolley burdened with coffeepot, hot croissants and a small glass of cantharides, my midday and evening *apéritif*. She too was naked, except for the little chiffon gloves, choker, stiletto mules and white candy-striped stockings, gartered at mid-thigh, that was her customary dishabille when we were alone.

Parking the trolley by my *escritoire*, she walked to where I stood. As she approached, and her own image filled the mirror – the reflection of a small, buxom girl whose silken appurtenances glistened like scalded milk in the mote-filled light that fell through the *jalousie* – the pleasurable anticipation that had animated her face was overtaken by puzzlement. Just as a dog cannot recognize its own likeness, due to its inadequately developed sense of selfhood, so too do some slaves fail to know themselves when confronted by a looking-glass. Long ago, when she had still been a child, Musyne had embraced a state of consciousness wherein her will had become inseparable from that of the Darkling Isle's ruling class. For her the fear and trembling of self-consciousness.

Her life was one with the universe of things, a mirror herself, really, a passionate but dull vessel which had reflected my needs and wants for over 20 years.

Something like a growl formed inside her throat, a rumble that grew until it visibly rattled her delicate trachea, like a far-off thunderstorm might a window or door.

"It's all right," I said, stroking her long, platinum hair. "It's all right."

"Make her go away," she said, peering deep into the glass. "That girl is a nasty girl. Musyne has seen her before. She doesn't belong here. Musyne hates her."

I grasped the mirror by its frame and tipped it, so that it rotated on its swivel and presented us with its impotent, silvered back. "Is that better?" The jealous growl subsided. "I said is that –" She nodded, compliantly; but her peevishness refused to be so easily mollified; may indeed, I ruefully considered, have been only exacerbated by my show of concern. Of late, her once rare, coquettish bouts of refractoriness that I had once found such a charming antidote to a subservience that, being so total, threatened to make her attentions insipid, had begun to surface with alarming frequency, as if 20 years of being owned by an

almost universally despised Englishman had begun to sow in her an unthinkable contempt.

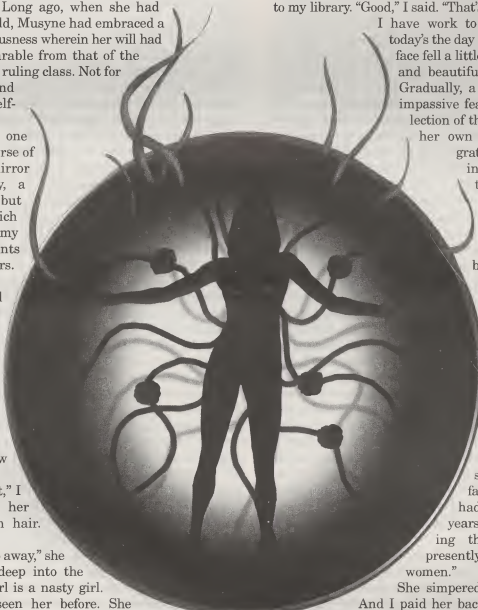
"Did you bring the books I asked for?" I said, addressing the skittish girl with a sharpness that I hoped would bring about a reversal of her mood. The ploy worked; immediately, her face lit up. Skipping to where the trolley stood, she pulled back the white linen that covered its surface and hung down its gleaming, metallic sides. There, on the racks designed to accommodate hotplates and tureens, lay several new tomes I had recently added to my library. "Good," I said. "That's all for now, Musyne."

I have work to do. But remember, today's the day of your injection." Her face fell a little. "To keep you young and beautiful, my bonbon, yes?" Gradually, a smile enlivened her impassive features, in slow recollection of the delight she took in her own body. "We must be grateful, I suppose, to the *incunabula* for one thing: that mankind's technological prowess is less cumulative than a matter of uncertain leaps and bounds. According to what we know of the chronology of the Ancients, the chemicals that, in you, have arrested the ageing process, are so out of sync with our own attainments that, without benefit of intervention by such an agency as represented by my grandfather, you might have had to wait another 200 years or more before enjoying the advantages you presently have over other women."

She simpered, uncomprehending.

And I paid her back with a sick, ironic grin. Those advantages I had spoken of had, of course, apart from making her somewhat sillier than the average slave, shortened her natural lifespan. In a few more years, when she had attained Christ's age on the cross, she would die, having entered her own, final passion. Such was the cost of arresting Time. Such the reason why the chemicals I regularly introduced into her bloodstream were available only on the black market, and why human beings still grew old and died.

I watched her leave. Then I threw on a dressing gown and put on my little, tasselled cap. Affectation that it was, that facetious little headpiece seemed nevertheless to act



like a talisman. On more than a few occasions it had tickled my brain into some sterling excogitative feats.

I walked to the *escritoire* and sat down. Last night I had acted like a fool, I decided. The worst kind of prig. And what is more, a man wholly ignorant of himself. If much that Madame Valery had said could be reasonably ascribed to some dysfunction of the mind or soul, I had still fallen under her spell. I could not forget her.

Nibbling abstractedly at a *croissant*, I opened the little compartment in which I had placed Madame Valery's corsage. As I retrieved the flower, a sheaf of yellow, dog-eared pamphlets, dislodged by my too-eager hand, fell out and spilled onto the desktop. I looked down at them – my *nom de plume* staring back, accusingly – and pride conceded to disgust as I briefly reflected upon the wasted years. My soubriquet's original purpose – to allow me to pass unremarked amongst Paris's salons and cafés – had become redundant some time ago. My father's emissaries had seen to that. But my life, and its purpose, had become, it seemed to me, redundant long before.

I swept the pamphlets aside and deposited the flower upon the blotter. From another compartment I took out a magnifying glass. I placed it next to the bright red bloom. Then I swung my chair about, bent over, and hefted up one of the heavy tomes. Placing it adjacent to the object of my inquiry, I opened it and set to work, my fingers trembling a little with what, if I should have taken the leisure to think about it, was an almost sexual anticipation.

The corsage, I discovered, had seven overlapping petals that surrounded a tight mass of yellow stamens. I picked it up, my fingers exploring its silky corolla. My fingers delved deeper; the sepals dropped onto the leaves of the outspread book. They ranged in colour from pink to red, and, at their outer fringes, exhibited a darker, almost purplish erubescence, such as that which one associates with a bruise. The smell too was bruise-like, overripe, like a decayed fruit, sweet, but at the same time morbid, not unlike rotting flesh. Indeed, the most astonishing quality about the flower was its flesh-like texture. Its luxuriantly silken, but rather creepy tactile quality, and the unaccountable manner in which it seemed to squirm, wriggle and even pulse whenever I would palpate it, reinforced the impression communicated by its scent: that this was a flower of death.

I could find nothing like it represented in the book – a catalogue of French flora, compiled before the Netherworld seeded Earth-Above with its own vegetation – but I did discover a few parallels. Most notably, an extinct shrub of the genus *Camellia*, whose lurid, rose-like blooms owed something, perhaps, to convergent evolution. It was listed as an oriental evergreen named after a certain Kamel, Latinized as *Camellus*, a Moravian Jesuit who collected plants in *Las Islas Pilipinas*, coincidentally the same archipelago that my distant ancestor, the first Richard Pike, had chosen for his own self-exile. Species, I read, had been introduced into Europa and Atlantis since before the time of the interregnum.

I pulled another tome from the trolley and set it upon the book I had already opened.

This book listed Netherworld flora, the plutonic, gran-

ite, basalt and hypabyssal trees and plants that would have choked and extinguished European civilization if they had not died out shortly after the orcs had been driven permanently underground. Again, I was unable to discover, amongst the lists of strange flowers, any exact resemblance to Madame Valery's corsage. But, as with the previous catalogue, I came across something to which that bloom seemed unaccountably related. A stone flower called the *Cornelian*.

The plate showed a translucent, semiprecious mineral whose reddish brown petaliferous angles and planes were – or so ran the text – due to colloiddally dispersed hematite. It might have been sard, differing only in its brighter shade, if its superficial inertness had not been informed with such dark subterranean vitality.

With a flash of insight, I realized that the corsage was an unheard of hybrid, an artificial, or more likely, completely natural cross-fertilization between a flower of the Netherworld and one of Earth-Above. A syngamy that had resulted in an unprecedented life form.

I studied it with mounting wonder. And then, self-pity. It was perhaps not so miraculous, or even unheard of. Like other "witches," I was myself a hybrid, a life form that, if composed of human flesh, was at the same time related to the perverse. I too was the result of a strange, somewhat obscene cross-fertilization of species.

Rescued from what threatened to become an increasingly despairing reverie by the creak of an opening door, I glanced over my shoulder. The door had only opened a fraction, but it was enough to allow Musyne to pry on me, her face half occluded by the jamb. I got up, walked to where she stood and, opening the door fully, lifted her up into my arms, proceeded to the big, four-poster bed, and deposited her upon its crumpled, unmade sheets.

I let the dressing gown slip to the floor. Then I lay down by her side and examined her. First, with a curiosity befitting her station and my own, and then with the same unhurried, if less reverent, attentiveness that I had recently bestowed upon the flower. Like the flower, she would, I knew, require a lifetime's study. And even then I felt I was unlikely to apprehend anything more than her most superficial elements. She was hidden from me. Like life itself.

I took her in my arms. Outside, the air was still, as if before a storm. The closeness had extended into the bedchamber. It pressed upon my inner ear, and converted itself into a sharp, ferrous-oxide taste whenever it came into contact with my tongue. I caressed her milky thigh, idly toying with a lace garter. I felt no inclination to carnality. I felt only the need to forget the meaninglessness of my life. The pointlessness of a struggle to control something I had no real comprehension of. In the 20-odd years of my association with Musyne, who had been slave, if not I? "What is it like, Musyne?" I said, softly. "What is it like, and what does it mean, to be a slave?" She stared back, blankly, as ignorant of my interior life as I had always been of hers. "I must know. Is it good? Is it the answer? Tell me." I grasped her by the shoulder; shook her. "Tell me, please." I don't think I had ever said please before. Not to her. Not to one who could not love, but only

beg. A slave. "Tell me," I said, angrily now.

She nuzzled my hand. And her impenitent vacancy filled the bedchamber, oppressive as the close summer's day.

I had been ushered by the butler into the drawing-room. But even before stepping over the threshold of her front door, a reminiscent scent – a sharp *altitudo* ballasted with gamy base notes – had heralded my re-acquaintance with Madame Valery's unique flower. That scent: I wondered how her guests could stand it. Perhaps custom had defanged its lacerating properties; or perhaps – and my intuition was, in part, at least, to prove accurate – Madame Valery's salon tolerated that killing fragrance much as the aficionados of the coca leaf exchange the occasional bleeding nostril for the enhancement that that drug lends their senses.

Tentatively, I edged through the press of bodies and towards the centre of the room. There, amid laughing and, it seemed, more than a little drunk company, Madame Valery lay upon a chaise-longue, attired, as when I had first met her, in a glistening, opal-white gown. Her favourite, scarlet-mouthed blooms were arrayed about her, sprigs, bouquets and wreaths rising like gross, inflamed organs of generation from what must have been over a hundred faience vases, urns and celadon flutes.

Her languid gestures, her wan complexion, the inattention that each flutter of her eyelashes, every twitch of her nose, seemed to confirm, all spoke of her worsening condition. But like the flock of callow men who flitted about her orbit, or who had gone down on their knees, adopting poses befitting fatuous, all-adoring youth, she laughed, and gaily too, a glass held up in a salute to Bohemia.

Before her stood a great samovar. The steam that swirled about its bulbous silver lid compounded the malodorousness that permeated the room. My head began to reel. I stopped dead in my tracks, and if observance of the proprieties had not been quite so deeply instilled in me, would have pulled out my handkerchief and employed it as an improvised pomander, so powerful, so disorientating had that scent of heaven and hell become.

"Theaceae," said a voice to my right. I turned. A short, fat man wearing a purple biretta looked up at me from over the tops of metal-rimmed spectacles. "Of the tea family," he continued. "One of the new plants to take root in the wastes. Hope, yet, that the world may become fecund again!"

"Theaceae," I mused. "Is that then what is creating this fug?"

He smiled, indulgently. "It is what we are drinking." And he held up a cutglass bumper. It was filled with a dark red liquid that resembled port, or brandy. The same beverage, I saw now I cast a more alert eye about the salon, that was being sampled by all Madame Valery's guests. "But let me introduce myself. Monsignor Teste, at your disposal."

"Germont," I said. I pointed to one of the macabre bou-

quets that filled the room. "The tea, I take it, is a tincture of the flower? The one you call Theaceae?"

"Of course."

For a moment, I seemed unable to wrest my gaze from the bloodshot, almost sentient *knowingness* of the engorged, thrusting blooms. "It seems an ugly name," I said. "And it is hard to believe that such a plant yields anything that is not noxious. It is a remarkable flower, nonetheless. Where does it come from?"

The Monsignor frowned; shook his head. "I do not think—"

"And what is its genesis?" I went on, attempting to override whatever fuelled his discretion. "It is my own belief that this Theaceae is a cross-fertilization of the *Camellia* and the *Cornelian*."

He beamed once more. Quite fortuitously, I had stroked this amateur botanist's ego. "My own thoughts exactly," he said, as discretion succumbed to conceit.

"And so I have christened it the *carnelia*."

He let forth a brief, expectorant laugh and clapped his hands, a little of the red tea spilling over the lip of his glass and spattering the prelatial shirt. "Did you hear that?" he said, as he turned to gain the attention of our hostess. "You have a new name for your flower, Madame. The *carnelia*!"

"Germont!" she said, seeing me for the first time. Her eyes were glazed. She seemed to be comprehending me as if through a mist. "I am so pleased you could come."

"*Carnelia*," pressed the Monsignor, somewhat piqued at being ignored. "If it is somewhat demotic, is it not delicious too?"

Madame Valery did not afford him the benefit of her gaze. That gaze belonged to me alone, a correlative to the illusive but unsettling vegetable scrutiny of the hypnotic, circumambient blooms. "So much better than your own taxonomic suggestion, *Teste*," she said. "*Theaceae*! So inelegant." And then – even as I sensed the little Monsignor wilt a little – she lifted her glass above her head, and, shrugging off her languorousness with what seemed a pure effort of the will, announced: "The *carnelia*!"

A young blade sitting near her raised his own bumper and seconded the toast.

"To the Lady of the *Carnelias*!" he cried, to the general laughter of all.

"And why not?" said our hostess. "I gave you this flower. I gave you all that it offers. Why should it not be dedicated to me!" There was more laughter.

The Monsignor spun about, presenting Madame Valery with his back, a sulk that would have brought forth more laughter, if only the little man had been at all conspicuous. "I gave you the flower, Madame," he muttered, in an undertone that I am sure no one heard but me.

Madame Valery coughed. One of her admirers offered her a napkin, another, a fresh bumper of the tea.

"Consumption?" I inquired, in an aside to the Monsignor, my voice as low as his had been.

He took off his spectacles and furiously polished them on his lapel. "I have been attending her for several weeks," he said. "I am" – he cleared his throat somewhat theatrically – "a doctor of medicine, as well as a divine."

And I can tell you her health has steadily declined. But no, it is not consumption. There is pulmonary damage, of course. And I thought at first that a bacillus might well be responsible. But the damage to the lungs, like the vesicles, pustules and lesions of the skin, which, initially, at least, so resembled lupus, had, I discovered, nothing to do with *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. No. Nothing at all." Meditatively, he gazed down at his spectacles and then replaced them on the bridge of his nose. "God help me, but I have seen nothing like it."

"The prognosis?"

He looked up at me with rheumy-eyed circumspection. "I have no idea. But I fear it is an ailment, a progressive degeneracy, that everyone in this room may one day share. She was the first, you see. The first of these people to experiment with the preparation we extract from *Theaceae*." He plucked one of the long-stemmed, bright red flowers from a nearby vase. "Have you tried the tea, Germont? The tea made from the quintessence of the flower's sap? Is that why you are here? If you have not, no doubt the fascination Madame Valéry exerts over all she meets may convince you to try it, no matter what I might say, or predict."

He proffered the flower. I took it, and held it to my nostrils. The incipient nausea I had felt on entering the salon was abating, and the carnelia's scent, though powerful, also possessed a certain allure, like the smell of sweat, cooking oil and cheap perfume that one associates with the cocottes who loiter in the Bois de Boulogne.

"It is, of course," he ventured, detecting, I think, a blasphemous sea change in my face, "merely a flower, however curious its anomalies."

"It represents a marriage between the Netherworld and Earth-Above. Between hell and heaven," I said, dreamily.

"Be assured, Monsieur, it has the power to transport you to both."

I looked round at those who constituted Violetta Valéry's salon. Of two score faces at least a handful mirrored the pallid countenance of their hostess. Those remaining displayed subtler but no less sure signs of creeping atrophy; enough to convince me that the gathering was indeed doomed. "This narcotic," I said. "Have they *all* tried it?"

"They are addicted to it, Monsieur. That is why they are here."

"And you?"

He hesitated. A shadow, like that cast by self-loathing, fell over his plump, otherwise innocuous visage, giving him a new, somewhat frightening demeanour, like that of a priest who has performed one too many exorcisms, or has taken to exploring, with a dedication as inappropriate as it is perfervid, the cult of the flagellum. "Of course. It was I who introduced the drug, first to Madame Valéry, and then to her circle." His face glistened, its patina of perspiration like diluted lard. "And it is testimony to the drug's potency that I still take it, no matter how well acquainted I have become with the inevitable consequences of its continued use. But you must not think that I, like the others in this room, Monsieur, am

in any way *dissipated*. No; I am a scholar."

"A scholar," I said, with sardonic flatness.

The little priest flushed. "The drug allows us to experience the past! It allows us to walk amongst the Ancients!"

Calm down, little man, I almost said, but contented myself with merely raising a doubtful eyebrow. "In the manner of incunabula?" I enquired, coolly.

"No, no. I am not talking about the re-experiencing, or embodiment, of lost fictions, but of *truths*. The immediate apprehension, not of civilization's fripperies, but of its elemental bedrock: the objective knowledge that is eternal, and not hostage to the vagaries of culture or time! It is those *eternal* Forms that we have access to now. And with them, we may no longer have need of the incunabula."

Despite my inveterate cynicism, I found myself instinctively rooting for anything said to undermine the influence people like my grandfather had had upon the world.

"They are an unstable element in our civilization," I agreed. "Puppets, the marionettes of old concepts better left dead. With them at the tiller, our human renaissance is out of control."

"But the tea," said the Monsignor, "the tea of the *Theaceae* – or carnelia, as you fancifully call it – allows *any* man to peer through the dark obscuring mists of the interregnum! Like opium, it opens up the gates of memory; and like that drug, allows the user to relive past events. But the tea does not work upon personal memory; no, it allows the exploration of *collective* memory. Deep, racial memories of ultimate truth!"

"While retaining independence?"

"Exactly! Those Forms that the incunabula embody are created things. But the vision conferred by the tea is of primary knowledge, the ideas – mathematical, musical and morphological – that make up the universe's underlying structure, its ground of Being."

I looked away, again scanning the faces that filled the salon. "But these side-effects—"

He sighed. "Call it parasitaemia. The damage to the internal organs is followed, after a while, by a deterioration of the cognitive faculties. Time travel does not come cheaply, Monsieur."

"And these people here," I said, unable to prevent a trace of mockery entering my voice. "Are they too then *scholars* engaged in disinterested research?"

"They are as you see them," he said, careless that he made his contempt plain.

"And why then did you introduce them to the drug?" Of course, I already knew the answer. "Is humanity expected to place its faith in such people? Is it by their agency, and theirs alone, that we may hope to discover the *truth*?"

Whatever disdain he might have felt for Madame Valéry's hangers-on, my own, I think, served only to remind him of his degradation.

His eyes flashed with anger. And then almost as quickly saddened.

He shook his head, walked away and disappeared into the crowd. He had bought himself into this company with

the promise of cheap pharmaceutical delights. Because, like me – like perhaps everybody here – he loved the Lady of the Carnelias.

“Can you truly re-experience the past?” I asked her later, after her guests had left. For much of the evening, I had roamed, disconsolate, amongst the gigolos, popinjays and twittering pretty-boys of her salon. I was offered the tea many times, but I deferred. And not solely out of fear. It was Violetta Valery I had come for, not her egregious narcotic. Then, just as I had begun to wonder that I should not retreat into the prospect my old life held, of manic bouts of scribble, scribble, scribble followed by equally manic bouts of coition with Musyne, all about me began to depart, and Madame Valery appeared, at last, by my side, urging me to accompany her into the garden.

On plunging into its balmy shadows, I had entertained the conceit that I was, perhaps, entering upon a garden of delights, a gorgeous labyrinth in which I might be lost forever. Moonlight bathed the shaded walks of dead, Netherworld foliage that had been sculpted into arbours and little pavilions wherein older, living plants grew. After strolling a while, we seated ourselves beneath a trellis polka-dotted with white chrysanthemums and heavy black tulips. The atmosphere was so ripe that, in a fit of daring, I had requested, and then prevailed upon her, to call me by my first name.

“Is it possible to walk with the Ancients?” she replied. “I used to think so, Freddie. But I learned that it was an illusion.”

“But the Monsignor—”

“We must all be grateful to the Monsignor for what he has given us, and indeed, the world. But I know more of this, this – and her stuttering mouth puckered into a mischievous grin – “this *carnelia*, than he does. The visions of the past are what we tea drinkers experience first. But after that comes knowledge of the truth.”

“The truth?” I thought of what the Monsignor had said. “A vision of universals? Of Forms unadulterated by the works of man?”

“The truth that nothing is true. That *all* is illusion. A dream. There is only one true Form, you see, Freddie. The Form of Forms. And the Form of Forms is *Love*.” An almost imperceptible breeze insinuated itself through the trellis’s slats. The shadows of leaf and petal trembled, dancing across the bench and the ground about my feet. “Don’t you wish to try the tea?”

“I don’t know,” I said, remembering all that I had been told of its deleterious effects, evidence of which, in the shape of the patently sick Madame Valery, sat only a few inches from me. “I—” There was a failure of nerve; and then, as in the opera box, when I had first felt the stirrings of passion, words tripped off my lips as if of their own accord: “I don’t know if I need to imbibe a hallucinogenic, or, if you will, *visionary* narcotic, to realize that I am in love.” I could not face her. But I knew she was staring at me, and that her eyes blazed, dark and flecked

with red. “I am not a rich man. And my best years are gone. Besides which, I have never been accounted regular of feature. Why then bestow upon me this intimacy? If intimacy it is.”

“I told you I was from the future, Freddie. Do you remember?”

“Yes, I remember,” I replied, warily. “And I should apologize, I feel, for my behaviour that night. I did not mean to be so—”

She put a finger to my lips, stilling their propensity to assume a life of their own. “In the future, there is no separation,” she said. “The unborn and the dead live in harmony. As do the free man and the slave.”

“Your calling card,” I said. “You wrote that—”

“That I am your slave, just as you are mine. That is what love is, is it not? Surrender of the self. Extinction. Death. A death that leads to life.” I turned then, and braved her eyes. They shone with the same fire I felt in my loins. I peered more deeply, wondering how I might distinguish passion from madness. “Freddie, when I first read your pamphlets—”

“They are political tracts,” I said, eager to keep the conversation on an even keel. “They are in no conceivable sense mystical.”

“Oh, but they *are*, Freddie. Must I believe I have been the only one to notice it? The only one to read between the lines of your shoddy, political harangues? To realize that you are a man who has spent all his life seeking love? And not a domestic, bourgeois love, no, but the blowing out of individuality, a dying into an ecstatic union with otherness.”

“This is slave talk,” I said, shifting on my seat. “This is the philosophy of *eroticism*.” But if her longing was fit only for a slave, and not to be countenanced by proud, free humans, it was, I knew, a longing I shared, if one I could seldom given expression to other than via the repressed, stultified medium of political agitation.

“The Omega Point,” she said. “That is where I have come from. To seek you. And you alone. Because of what you are famous for, Freddie. For the legend you will become. For your belief in enslavement to the Ultimate.”

I stooped and put my head between my hands. Like the passion she had engendered, her madness was, perhaps, communicable. But it was too late to seek an antidote. Closing my eyes, I began to perceive my life’s mission as having a secret goal, one that, until now, I had only glimpsed in moments of extreme fear, want or carnal surrender: fusion. With a world outside of Becoming. The world that she called the *future*.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I said. “I love you. I have loved you ever since I first saw you.”

“You want to escape? I know, I know.” I felt her hand on the back of my head, playing with my thick but greying hair. “You believe your life is meaningless. You have begun to doubt your crusade. But I tell you, you *can* escape.” She pulled at a few stray locks in a manner that, on another occasion, would have seemed playful, but which now seemed to taunt. “Don’t you wish to escape, Freddie? I know you do. All your life you’ve wanted to escape. Look at me, Freddie. Tell me that you don’t want

to be mine. Tell me that you don't want to follow me back to the Omega Point. Tell me that you don't wish to die."

"I can't, I can't. Please, please," I said, "don't make me." To my consternation and anger, the tears had begun to flow. The silence crowded round, relieved only by the sound of my breast's convulsive heaving. After some minutes, when I had managed to restore a moiety of my manhood, Madame Valery spoke again:

"You need only take the tea. And then you and I will be one. You *will* take the tea, won't you, Freddie?"

"Is escape so easy?"

I sat up. One of her maidservants stood before us with a tray. She set it down on the bench, and then swiftly retired back to the house. On the tray stood two glasses of the dark red tincture of the carnelia.

"And have *you* escaped, Madame Valery?" I said.

She got up and walked to a swing that stood nearby. Sitting down, and arranging the capacious folds of her skirts, she began to idly push herself to and fro, her face as serious as a child's. "I escaped a long time ago." She swung a little higher. "Human beings go through life entirely alone, Freddie. And when they die they remain alone, as alone as they were before they were born. As separated from each other as are the categories of time. No escape – or so I long thought. But this loneliness: I'll have no more of it. All space, all time, everything that keeps us apart. I'll put an end to it. That's *my* crusade, Freddie. That's why I'm here."

"And so," I said, a little sanity returning, and seeking to humour her, "why have you come from the future? Because of me? Because I justify slavery? Are you here to change the past, and so save your time from these *abolitionists* you talk so freely about?"

"But you don't understand. *This* is the future." I waited in the moon-fringed shadows, waiting for her to go on. She kicked at the ground each time the swing crossed the equinox of her slowly magnifying arc, sending herself progressively higher, until, at the apogee of each passage, she seemed to meld with the night and its flashing stars. "This is the future, Freddie, here, now and always. It is the future dreaming of the past. This moment exists only because we in the future dream it. All is a dream. The virtual manifestation of future desires."

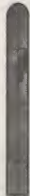
With a great scraping of her calf-skin ankle boots across the hard soil, she narrowed the swing's arc until she achieved stasis. She closed her eyes and flung back her head. "We are both of us unreal. But that is the nature of the universe. *Everything* is unreal, a dream. With the tea, we come to understand. And come to understand too that, in dreaming, we may know reality. The reality of love, and death."

Slowly, she rose and, with her head now lolling forward, so that she stared at the dark undergrowth to either side of her feet, walked towards me. And as she did so, she unbuttoned her right sleeve and turned it back.

"Yes, I'm dying, Freddie. But now you're here, I no longer care. In death, you see, I will finally understand love's absoluteness. I will no longer be alone. I will be one with the Form of Forms." The denuded arm revealed a

series of lesions which, as she drew close, I saw to be growths – angry, red, petaloid malignancies that were fleshly approximations of the carnelia. And as she grew closer still, I saw that those eruptive lesions writhed, squirmed and wriggled, that she was alive, with a seething life not her own.

I jumped up, knocking the tea tray onto the floor. The glasses smashed against the cobbled path. I backed away, unable to wrest my gaze from the horribly enflowered limb. And then, as I at last summoned up the requisite strength, I spun about and – mind empty of all thought – ran deep, deep into the night.



I never returned.

It was not, I think, the memory of her ravaged body that dissuaded me. Whatever I may be, I am not so bereft of compassion as to be ruled principally by disgust. No; it was the fact that I found her illness, both mental and, it must be said, physical, inexplicably seductive. And I was afraid. Afraid of the stirrings of my shadow-self. The dark potent desires that had been with me since childhood, old, vengeful and as appallingly numinous as the perverse itself.

Several weeks passed, and then one night, quite unexpectedly, the little Monsignor knocked at my door. I asked Musyne to show him in. And, after she had taken his hat and coat, he joined me on the balcony, where, in pensive anticipation of enjoying my slave, I was taking my customary glass of cantharides.

"Madame Valery is missing," he said.

I shook my head. "I am not, you must understand, privy to her movements. But of one thing you may be certain: she is not *here*."

"She has sickened greatly, Monsieur." He took the proffered seat. "And, of late, has talked unceasingly of you. Yesterday, she received a visit from a man who, though I was not present at the time, would seem to have been a half-human."

"A witch? Like myself?"

"You, Monsieur, are hardly –"

"Spare me your delicacies, priest. What of this man?"

"He said he represented your father."

Melchezidek, I thought at once.

"And?"

"And, according to Madeleine, the housemaid who provides me with intelligence, and who on this occasion, as on many others, had had her ear placed faithfully to the door, this man, this witch, told her that she must renounce you. That her hold upon you was evil. That your family would suffer greatly – your father, in particular – if she should further add to your woes."

"Damn him," I said. "Damn them all!" I made a fist of my right hand and punched it into my left. "My family. Ha. They are nothing more than a nest of officious vipers."

"She loves you, Monsieur." He sighed, like one whom defeat has liberated, and who is allowed, now that he has nothing more to lose, to embrace the possibility of grace.

"I fear for her. But I think I know where she may be found. If you would assist me—"

"Yes," I said, eager that that grace should extend to me. I had been a poltroon. I had refused to engage with what, ever since that night in Madame Valery's garden, indeed, ever since first meeting her, I had known to be my destiny. Whatever terror, or revelation, awaited, I would meet it. Now. "What can I do?"

"You once asked where the carnelia might be found. Monsieur, I have long kept that a secret. Those who frequent Madame Valery's salon have, I regret, been so unworthy of her as to sell the flower. And others, outside our little circle, have begun to clamour for a ready supply of the tea. It is to the carnelia's source, Monsieur, that Madame Valery has flown. The flower's *sanctum sanc-torum*. Yes; she has gone there to die amongst the blooms that are her heart's delight, and, in death, to receive from them one last, immortal vision. I am sure of it."

"You cannot go by yourself?" I said, getting up. Musyne peeked interrogatively about the frame of the door, as, of late, had been her impudent wont. I indicated to her that she should ready herself to dress me. "What is this place?"

"We must go into the Latin Quarter," he said. "And deep, too. Deep into its byways and alleys."

I clucked my tongue.

"I have come to learn that you are a Pike," he said, gazing down at the floor. "Your family's exploits are legendary."

"Fame is fame, perhaps, ill or no," I responded. "But I'm no swordsman. No bloody adventurer. I'm a hack. I hope you do not think I will provide you with an adequate bodyguard?"

He pursed his lips. "Whether or not you are a swordsman, Monsieur, you are Madame Valery's love. You *will* come, won't you?"

"I have said I will."

Musyne brought me my frock-coat. I slipped it on, patting its breast pocket to make sure that she had put the paper-knife – whose extra-literary offices might well be called upon tonight – in its customary place. I looked the diminutive priest in the eye. "Sometimes, the pen is mightier than the sword. Or if not a pen—" The priest took off his spectacles and, with brisk, nervous flicks of the wrist, began to rub the lenses against his lapel. "The Latin Quarter is not so dangerous as is sometimes supposed," I muttered, unhappy that he seemed to need my reassurance.

"I go there often," he said, resettling the spectacles on his nose, and looking up at me, owlishly, "for supplies of the flower. But as the fame of the carnelia has spread, so have there been people willing to kill to get their hands on it. So far, we remain undetected. Though some of my couriers have met, in the last few weeks, with some *extremely* unpleasant fates." He stared, abstractedly, into the apartment, made an almost inaudible *tsk-tsk* as his gaze alighted on Musyne, and then shrugged, as if in nonchalant concession that such a fate might soon be his. "Shall we go?" he added.

We took the Monsignor's coach and four – an equipage bereft of ecclesiastical, and indeed, all other signs of pomp – and proceeded towards the Latin Quarter.

There, the Place Maubert awaited, and its tangle of dark riverside streets.



The re-sanctified pile that was Saint-Séverin had once belonged to a purely human world. But the sump created by the surrounding tenements had seeped into the church's foundations and been drawn into its walls and façade. Its ancient stones were now like those of the other, more recent buildings in the Latin Quarter. As black as gangrenous flesh, they glistened with perverse ruin, infected, as they were, with that weird petrophysical entropy that had transformed this portion of the City of Light into a single, putrefying abattoir.

We debouched onto the wet, sticky pavement. Telling his coachman to wait for us, the Monsignor led the way to the west door. Before following, I glanced about apprehensively, conscious that obscure streets such as these – carpeted in mucilaginous rubbish, and lined with once proud but now all-but liquefied architecture – harboured, perhaps, as many hooligans and cutthroats as the Boulevard St Germain. Seeing nothing, but feeling as if I were in danger of being transfixed by a thousand pairs of eyes, I hunched my shoulders and scurried after the priest.

He knocked on the door. Almost immediately I heard a lock being shot. The door opened, if only fractionally, and we were greeted by a murmurous voice urging us to eel between post and jamb. Inside, our doorman stood revealed as a Benedictine.

"Is she here?" said the Monsignor.

The monk nodded. Enquiringly, his gaze met my own.

"A friend," explained the Monsignor. "Or rather, a friend of Madame Valery's. It is my hope that he can help her. I fear no one else can."

"Only God can help her now," said the other. "It is enough, I feel, that we concern ourselves with praying that she may emerge from her derangement in sufficient time for us to administer last rites."

"Very noble of you, I'm sure," I said, "especially since you brought her to this pass." I cocked my head towards the priest. "Aren't you the ones who introduced her to the tea?"

"Our Order had nothing to do with that."

"And I wish by Christ's bones it had had nothing to do with me," said the Monsignor. "I have been weak. But I am a man, Monsieur," he said, looking up at me, and evoking the hoary old excuse, "and I have but a man's heart, and a man's flesh." He began to walk down the nave. "Come, let us go to her."

The monk and I followed in his wake.

The nave was littered with fallen masonry: crescents of fan-vaulting and multitudinous shards of slate, all of which bled corruption. The mess oozed across the flagstones and under the pews, an impossibly cool pyroclastic flow that would be forever settling into a gelatinous variant of basalt or obsidian. But whereas the church's effluence was as livid as congealed blood, its walls were as fresh wounds, rampant with a burgeoning, deep crimson. The carnelia was everywhere. It seethed across maggot-

eaten stucco, and hung, dripping its intemperate sap, in great, pendent clusters that suggested obscene haematomas, from a mucous membrane that had spread across the blasted vault. I walked through some kind of hothouse, it seemed, an incubator gravid with an unprecedented, aberrant vitality, a florescence of death.

"Where has it come from?" I murmured. "What does it mean?"

"The flower is from the wastes," said the monk. "And it means that, outside the Earth's cities, there is a new parturition afoot. Life that represents both humanity and the perverse, but which is due to supersede both."

"A mongrel life? Hardly new. I myself—" But I chose not to surrender so easily to the confessional.

"Mongrel? You may call it what you like. For centuries, now, the restored order of St Benedict has sought to preserve and recover such learning as flourished under the dispensation of the first Christians. But the grimoires we compiled were little more than collections of incantations and spells. It has not been until the coming of the incubula that we have had a real chance of connection with the Ancients. But then my brothers discovered another route to the past. A better route. One over which our monastic order could exercise total control, and so dedicate knowledge to the greater glory of God, rather than heathen amusement. The new life that is transforming the wastes, and whose evidence you see all about you, is a sign of that greater life to come, the promise and hope of resurrection in Our Lord, Jesus Christ!"

We had come to a halt. Moonlight fell through the east window.

About the altar were a group of monks. They squatted, tailor-like, on their hams, coarse habits pulled over their knees. Eyes half-closed, with quills poised at the ready, they executed jerky, and, it seemed, quite involuntary movements, as one by one they emerged from trance to make a few, swift marks on the ledger-like tomes spread before them.

"The scriptorium," said the monk at my side.

The assembled scribes, after making their entries, as quickly resumed their drugged, sentinel-like poses at the gates of the land of dreams.

The Monsignor ascended the altar steps. As he bent over the rectangular stone, in what I at first thought to be a ritual genuflection, I saw him tear at some of the vine-like tangles of the carnelia that had hitherto obscured my line of sight. A sleeping, or unconscious, form of a woman was revealed, who, after several more streamers of bloody vegetation had been pulled free from what seemed the woman's body itself, I knew to be Madame Valery.

"The woman is debauched," said the monk. "She has brought this disaster upon herself. The tea must be used sparingly, with respect."

I ran up the steps and was presently at the Monsignor's side.

She lay supine in one of her opalescent gowns, all about her a gaudy confusion of blooms, thorn-encrusted stems – as savage as reels of barbed wire – and little pools that constituted the red crushed excrescence of the

carnelia. The shock of seeing her smothered in that morbid foliage gave way almost at once to a graver concern, one predicated upon the sure knowledge that the flowers, rather than attacking her from without, had erupted from within. That they had had their origins, here, in the fleshly stuff of stones and mortar. That they had migrated to other flesh with a horrible ease. That humanity, for them, was but a stage on the highway that led to the new parturition. For as I raised my eyes to heaven – a hoarse shout ascending to the vault – I beheld the great pod that hung directly above: a gigantic blood sac which the uplifted tendrils of her body reached towards, as if to offer nurture.

"*The sons of God,*" said the monk, from behind, in a jubilant, antiphonal shout, "*have lain with the daughters of men and found them fair!*"

To what unknown, perhaps even more horrible metamorphosis, was her blighted loveliness being this night transposed?

I gathered her up into my arms. Not only death was at work here, but birth, a monstrous birth.

"Stop!" screamed the Monsignor. "You're killing her!"

"No," said Madame Valery, stirring within my embrace, "let us be. All of you meddlesome clerics, let us be. It is him I came here for. And now at last I have him. It is finished. I can at last return home." The white gown was slowly turning crimson, as the crushed blooms radiated sap and her very body offered up its own converted essence. Something snapped within the bustier. The sodden fabric gave way, and a rosette of diseased flesh exploded from her breast with cathartic insistence. A necklace, to which was fastened a small phial of what looked, at first, like blood, but which I guessed was the tincture of the carnelia, hung within her cleavage. Even as I watched, it vanished beneath a corolla of overlapping flaps of tissue. She groaned, as one in labour. Then a series of stems – stems that had until then been human rhizomes and tubers, but which now burst into the air, quivering with alien life – wrapped themselves about what was left of her bosom, and then they too rose, adding to the long, whip-like strands of febrile discharge that already reached blindly, pathetically, towards the pod.

"Violetta Valery died a long time ago, Freddie," she said, her pupils dilating with approaching mortality. "It is the flower. It is the flower which is from the future. The flower that has parasitized my body. It comes from a time when all will be put right. Oh, the travail it has endured so that it might come here. Through voids of terror. Through hearts of nothingness. Through the darksnesses that demarcate the dimensions. But it is true what I told you. I am from the future, too. And I remember everything of the journey. Of the falling from eternity into time. And of the dreamtime, where I knew I would find you. Yes, Freddie, I remember everything. For I am the flower. *I am* the carnelia."

Behind me was a thunderous rending of wood. And then a great roar of voices. I swung about, carrying Violetta off the altar, and, giving the invading mob only a cursory glance – my blood had frozen with recognition at



arms, would have been impossible, even if I had thought that the *apaches* might be impressed by such a show of non-resistance.

Grimly, I stumbled down the steps, leaving the Monsignor and the Benedictines to provide the *apaches* with whatever cruel, sordid entertainment their low-born minds might devise.

I knew, with a certain fatalism that revived a dormant spirit of intractability within me, that the western door provided the only exit. I laid Madame Valery down at the foot of the steps and withdrew the paper-knife from my coat pocket. The vanguard of the *apaches* closed in.

"Give us the flower, priest!" said one.

"He's no priest," said another. "He's an

aristo. A slave master."

"No priest, that's certain," I said. "I'm—"

"He's Lord Soho," said Madame Valery. I glanced behind. She had eased herself onto one elbow and surveyed the invading barbarians with all the contempt befitting a great Parisian courtesan. "And yes, he is an aristocrat. Of the spirit. As am I. The flower belongs not to you, but to those who will inherit the *future*."

"Lord Soho," I muttered to myself, as if I were only now cognizant of that name. "Lord Soho," I repeated, relishing the title's bittersweet taste. And then, remembering our peril, I gave all my attention to the enemy. They were a pug-ugly bunch of reprobates. Fungous tumours covered their skin. And the reek of the Latin Quarter came off their breath and seeped from every pore.

"Freddie!" cried Madame Valery. Two of the vanguard broke off from the main body and loped towards us, skipping over the accumulated debris that cumbered the nave. They carried flaming brands and cudgels. I readied myself. "Freddie!" she cried again. "You told me that you do not know who you are. I tell you: you have many selves. I can sense it. The witch, the swordsman, the lord, the rake, the seditionary, and the traitor. But you will be

hear-
ing their
massed cry —
sought out shadows, a door,
a hole in the ruined walls, anything, indeed, that might
facilitate our escape.

"*Apaches!*" cried the Monsignor, crossing himself. A swell of raggedly-apparelled men and women surged forward. The monk who had opened the door to us ran back down the nave, his hands extended in protestation, abjuring those who had profaned the house of God to leave.

He died as he reached the first *apaches* who had run to meet him, instantly succumbing to a battery of rocks, blows, cleavers and staves.

"Quickly now," I said to the Monsignor. "How do we get out of here?" He went a little way down the altar steps and then retreated. An idea — born of terror, or conceived in a spirit of rational, if somewhat un-Christian, self-preservation — seemed to occur to him. Continuing to back away, he reached the line of entranced scribes. There, he squatted down, half-closed his eyes and, affecting an expression as vapid as their own, took his place amongst them, as if hoping that he too might find refuge in the past.

To follow his example, with Madame Valery in my

reconciled with yourself. I know you will. Become what you are, Freddie. Here. Take it. Please. It's the only way. Know that you too are an *incunabulum*."

Daring momentarily to take my eyes off the two onrushing, mire-bred belligerents, I turned and saw that Madame Valery held up the small phial that had hung between her ravaged breasts. I knew then that I was condemned to follow her, to be with her wherever she should go. And if, in some measure, I had always known it, but had lacked the courage to embrace the fate that was concomitant with embracing her, both in mind and body, I now sought swift redress. Rapidly, I knelt, snatched the chain from her neck, pulled the cork with my teeth, and swallowed that cold, bitter tea. And the seal was set upon our spiritual union.

I awoke.

And it was as if I had awoken from a suffocating dream, wherein I had thought myself to be someone else, and now laughed with joyful relief *No, no, I was never that person, never that person at all!*

The world about us had stilled, leaving Madame Valery and me isolated on a little promontory about which were ranged impotent, if misbegotten, horrors, a nightscape of frozen, vaguely-human shapes.

"*Espiritu Santo!*" I screamed, remembering the old war cry of the Pikes. I darted forward and slashed the throat of the *apache* who stood nearest me.

For what seemed an age, he did not move. Only the thin, spurting pulse of a severed artery, and the pitter-patter of blood upon the floor, testified that, somewhere, time still existed. Then slowly, as if in concession to seconds, minutes and hours that, if displaced, were still exigent, he tipped sideways and collapsed upon the stones.

"Be careful," said Madame Valery, "the drug will at first speed up your reactions and distend your sense of time. But your body is unaccustomed to the tea. Soon, too soon, you will go into trance and fall back into the past!"

I despatched the *apache* who provided the next immediate threat with like celerity. But time was already gathering up its skirts and preparing to run. In his death spasm, the catiff whose throat I had elegantly partitioned cast his flambeau high into the air. Looking round, I saw it come to ground, roll under the choir stalls and enkindle them. The wood – unaffected by the rot that permeated the church's superstructure – instantly began to blaze.

The surviving vanguard began to move somewhat more fleetly. Knowing I would not retain the advantage for long, I pocketed my blade, hurried to where Madame Valery lay, bent over, scooped her up in my arms, and proceeded down the nave. And I wondered at how the drug not only speeded up my reactions, but released such a quantity of adrenaline that it seemed pertinent to fear for the structural integrity of my heart.

Elbowed aside, the tardy *apaches* groped at air, or else fell like ninepins, the shimmering, convective air like a veil about to be rent, the fabric of reality giving way to the world of fabrication, the wilful narrative that lay at my heart.

I burst through the western door. And, fuelled by what

was by now a truly unimaginable reserve of energy, I ignored the waiting carriage and continued to sprint, the *carnelia* burning in my veins like brimstone.

Only when I reached the river did I come to myself.

I fell to my knees, letting Madame Valery slip from my arms onto the embankment. Then, with an exhaustion descending upon me so profound that I might have been pole-axed, I sank down beside her. But I was conscious, still, as was she.

"I am your slave, Violetta," I managed to say, before the delicious chill that was suffusing my body and the swoon that was overtaking my thoughts became complete. "I have always been your slave."

"And I yours," she replied, a small dribble of blood issuing from the side of her mouth as she turned her head on the rough stones to look into my eyes.

The truth. Yes; this was the truth. The truth the Monsignor had promised. Great wards fell off the rusty locks of my soul, and I soared, free, like an unchained bird. Cities, great cities, came into view; I winged over their gilded rooftops. And I saw the glories of the ancient past. But it was another truth that was all-important, not this phantasmagoria, this mummery of lost time. Through the mist-like vision of another age I saw her face, and, with my last vestiges of strength, reached out to touch it, as she had once touched me, long ago, in the Théâtre Nationale de l'Opéra. She was what I had always desired, but not allowed myself to surrender to; that which all my life I had sought to control. I was like my father, and his father, and his father before him. I was perverse. Something alien in human shape. Something wrested from both Earth-Above and the Netherworld.

An *incunabulum*.

That is why I had run away from home. Because I could not bear to look at myself in a mirror. That is why I had abjured freedom and justice. Because of a craven need to keep my essential self in chains.

The tyrant in me released its hold; I fell into darkness, my exhaustion now as absolute as it was sweet. And I knew the bliss of liberation.

All was one. The witch, the swordsman, the lord, the rake, the seditionary, the traitor. All was in equilibrium.

She had triumphed. The perverse had overcome all human resistance, and mated itself with my soul, an acknowledged equal. I was, at last, myself entire.

Hearing a great drum-roll of falling masonry I crooked my head about, and, with what remained of my strength even then leaving my body, descried the church on fire, the tongues of flame like the blooms of great, shrieking flowers sending their last perfumed chorale to heaven. The festering walls ignited and fell in upon themselves, revealing a crimson interior. Out of the flames – from the exploding blood sac that had been the gigantic pod – I saw a shape emerging, a form that was like a man, but not a man, immense in proportions, and evilly fair. I saw wings unfold. Light shine from a beautiful, malefic face. There was another explosion; the vault began to collapse. And as the creature fell backwards into the fire, the fire in my own veins finally carbonized my overexcited senses, and I saw no more.

The coffin's burden of sickly wreaths glistened like watered silk in the few rays of sunlight that broke through the gathering clouds. The air was close. Thundery. I threw a scattering of earth into the open grave, and walked away.

In the end, did it matter what Violetta Valery had said about the future? I had spent my life living a lie. Mine had been the real madness. The truth, life's ultimate truth, for me, lay in her absence.

A little way off, Melchizedek and Musyne waited. We could all go home now I no longer feared. Now that I was free.

It had begun to rain. Paris would soon be as insufferable as a hothouse – if one robbed of the marvellous atrocity of its most valuable bloom.

I would put my affairs in order. There would be other flowers. Other examples of new life. The seed of their resurrection would spread, from here, and from wherever the carnalia, or its like, had taken root, to germinate the petrified countryside with a new and terrible bounty. And something, perhaps, the like of which I had glimpsed from the banks of the Seine before I had succumbed to trance, would be born. A race of giants, a race of angel-demons, as magnificent as they were evilly fair.

She was gone, but I was sustained by the knowledge that I travelled towards her, to that strange, absolute land of futurity. The place where Violetta dwelt. For I knew, in my heart of hearts, that she had been right. Life was dream. Insubstantial. As lonely as it was long. Only in surrendering to the absolute could separation be annihilated. Only then could the gulf between "you" and "me" be spanned. Death and love, the tea had shown me, were the paths by which we attain our future state, that is, our destiny; death and love, whose distinctions were as illusory as time itself.

I looked down at my hands. Saw the lesions, the first signs of lurid buds, that would, enflowered, take me to the long-hoped-for communion, and rest. I was a slave. A slave to the love, the new love, that I had become addicted to. The love that was final oblivion.

Richard Calder is from Essex but lives in the Philippines. His half-dozen novels have built him a considerable reputation. The above is the third in his ongoing "Lord Soho" series of stories (see *Interzone* issues 154 and 159 for the earlier episodes). Each is set in the same strange far-future world, but a couple of generations after the preceding tale.

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ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

Suddenly it's the 100th "Ansible Link" column... and in between the virtual celebration's unstinting refills of digital bubbly we must report the Hugo awards from this year's World SF Convention in Chicago, which had 5,229 preregistered members. Novel: *A Deepness in the Sky* by Vernor Vinge. Novella: "The Winds of Marble Arch" by Connie Willis (*Asimov's*). Novelette: "10¹⁶ to 1" by James Patrick Kelly (*Asimov's*). Short: "Scherzo with Tyrannosaur" by Michael Swanwick (*Asimov's*). Dramatic Presentation: *Galaxy Quest*. Related Book: *SF of the 20th Century* by Frank M. Robinson. Professional Artist: Michael Whelan. Editor: Gardner Dozois. Semipreview: *Locus*. Fanzine: *File 770*. Fan Writer: Dave Langford (good heavens, that makes 18). Fan Artist: Joe Mayhew. John W. Campbell Award for best new writer: Cory Doctorow. And Worldcon bid for Toronto, Canada, in 2003 beat that year's opposing Mexico bid by an overwhelming majority.

CORSAIRS OF THE SECOND ETHER

Piers Anthony's web newsletter offered a shock revelation that the controversial rape episode in *Lord Foul's Bane* stemmed from Stephen Donaldson's having been gang-raped 60 times in prison in 1973, leading to his death from AIDS in 1996. A little research indicates that Anthony has confused "our" still-living Donaldson with an entirely different one.

Carl Barks (1901-2000), the most illustrious of comics artist-writers to work on Disney's characters, died on 25 August after a year's struggle with leukaemia; he was 99. Barks brought Donald Duck to life as a memorable curmudgeon, added Uncle Scrooge McDuck to the pantheon, and had an asteroid named after him in 1933.

Sir Alec Guinness (1914-2000), world-famous, well-loved and hugely talented actor, died on 5 August aged 86. Playing Obi-Wan in the *Star Wars* trilogy made him rich; his long, varied stage and movie career otherwise had little to do with sf, one nifty exception being the 1951 Ealing techno-comedy *The Man in the White Suit*.

Emil Petaja (1915-2000), best known for his 1960s "Kalevala" sf novels based on Finnish myth, died on 17 August aged 85. He had also been a prolific pulp-magazine author in the '40s and '50s; in 1995 SFWA honoured him as their first "Author Emeritus."

Terry Pratchett provided a quotable quote at the Chicago Worldcon: "I like to live dangerously. That's why I use Microsoft."

"Martin Scott," author of the Thraxas comic fantasies, has been dramatically ousted by his publishers. An Orbit press release reveals that he is in fact "Martin Millar, the very successful cult author," who gained astonishing world fame by novelizing *Tank Girl*. Well I never.

Chet Williamson gives warning to the world: "A woman named Ann Melrose sent a story titled 'The Audition' to Ellen Datlow as a submission to SciFi.Com. Ellen immediately recognized the story as a rewrite of a story I had sold to Ellen in the late '80s, 'To Feel Another's Woe,' published in her 1989 anthology *Blood is Not Enough*. Melrose had reduced the story from 5700 words to 3200 words, and changed it from first person to third person. The entire submission retained my plot, characters, action, and dialogue, scene by scene. The plot of an actress who steals emotions from her lovers is identical, although now they audition for *Cats* instead of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and as for specific parallels, one counts them by the hundreds." Ann Melrose claims to be "totally unaware" of the original, multiply reprinted story.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Publishers and Sinners. *Amazing Stories* is being dropped by its publishers Wizards of the Coast after the current Summer 2000 issue. Assets and inventory are being sold to Ben Bova's *Galaxy Online*. Meanwhile Gollancz's June reissue of Joe Haldeman's *Mindbridge* cunningly follows the dud 1980s Futura edition which omitted the final Chapter 53. And *Voyager* are leaping aboard the sf/fantasy classics bandwagon with a Summer 2001 list featuring hard-to-find titles like *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *Foundation* in "very smart editions, which people will be proud to be seen reading in pub-

lic." As opposed (muses our informant) to all that *Voyager* sf and fantasy that we're ashamed to be seen reading...

As Others See Us. When is a novel not a novel? The *New York Times* makes a careful and pointed distinction in its 23 August article on writers who retire, which mentions Iain Banks's current sabbatical year in the wake of "a relentless writing schedule that has resulted in an annual novel or science fiction title for the last 16 years."

Mythopoeic Fantasy Awards. Adult Literature: Tamsin, Peter S. Beagle. Children's: *The Folk Keeper*, Franny Billingsley. Scholarship (Inklings): *Roverandom* by J. R. R. Tolkien, ed. Christina Scull & Wayne G. Hammond. Scholarship (Other): *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness*, Carole G. Silver.

Ichor by Any Other Name. A correspondent reports a website using gematric analysis to "deduce" personalities from names. Typing in Lovecraftian Cthulhu deities produces such insights as: "Your first name of Nyarlathotep has given you a pleasant, easy-going, friendly nature. Personal contacts are important to you..."

Yo-Ho-Ho! Molly Brown looked further into unauthorized reprinting of stories by Japan's long-established *SF Magazine*. Other victims include Eric Brown, Storm Constantine, Paul McAuley, Kim Newman and Bridget McKenna (USA). From Australia, Sean Williams confirms that he, Terry Dowling and Lucy Sussex all suffered similarly in the wake of the 1999 Australian Worldcon - where friendly *SFM* editor Yoshio Kobayashi introduced himself to many authors - but that protesting brought contracts and promises of payment.

R.I.P. Ken Cheslin, long-time British fan, died suddenly and unexpectedly in August; he was in his mid-60s. Active since the 1950s, he was a founder of the major '60s fanzine *Les Spinge* and of British Tolkien fandom, not to mention a stalwart of the British SF Association (which he chaired) and various national sf conventions. In recent years he'd battled heroically against low income and a cranky photocopier to reprint many volumes of classic fanzine material.

Thog's Masterclass. Dept of Wooden Handshakes. "Pleased to meet you," Arnstein said, and took the offered hand. It felt like a wooden glove inside a casing of cured ham..." (S. M. Stirling, *On the Oceans of Eternity*, 2000) • Dept of Advanced Darwinism: "In every human being there is the genetic code for mutation." (*X-Men* ad, 2000)

Not long ago Philip Pullman received what he took to be a fan letter from one of his young readers. It contained a note and a charming picture of a squirrel. The note went something like this:

"Mr Pullman: I enclose a picture of a very cute squirrel. Please admire it. Now that you have admired it, I want you to remember your book, which the world has spent aeons waiting for. Now put these two things together. I want you to be able to admire the squirrel again.

Finish your book, or the squirrel will die!

— Anonymous."

Anyone, child or adult, who has read the first two volumes in Pullman's "His Dark Materials" trilogy, will understand (if not approve of) the impatient writer of that letter. The first part, *Northern Lights* (1995; published in America as *The Golden Compass*), won both the Carnegie Medal and the Guardian Award for Children's Fiction. The second part, *The Subtle Knife* (1997), was praised by one critic as comparable to the work of E. Nesbit and Lewis Carroll, and just about every commentator on both books has mentioned Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. Since then, we have had a three-year wait for the third volume, *The Amber Spyglass*, published in November 2000.

As with all truly exceptional literature, the "His Dark Materials" trilogy is not really "like" anything else, but certainly the scale of imagination and storytelling are in the same range as the best writers of what is often called

"A Tale which Holdeth Children from Play"

Philip Pullman

interviewed by

Elizabeth Counihan

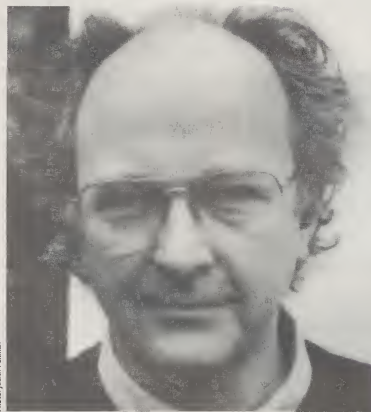


Photo: Justin Pullman

fantastic literature. Pullman himself might not feel flattered by the comparison. He has consistently said that he does not regard himself as a fantasy writer, a genre that he rather dislikes. Although he read *The Lord of the Rings* in his youth, he was not unduly impressed by it, feeling that it did not relate to the struggles of real people. But he did learn the principles of writing a quest-story from Tolkien:

"It must obey three laws: (1) The quest must be hard to accomplish. (2) It must be easy to understand. (This is the most difficult bit to do). (3) A great deal must hang on it."

And this is what he said about C. S. Lewis at our interview:

"I don't like his fiction and especially detest his children's fiction. I think his Christian apologetics are dishonest. He is a very powerful rhetorician and has a very cunning and accomplished use of the language. He has some very sensible and very wise things to say about writing fiction and writing for children in particular, but his work is dedicated to propaganda in the service of a form of religion I find poisonous and damaging."

"I didn't read any of the Narnia books until I was grown up and I saw immediately, the way adults do, that I was being got at. The sympathies of the reader were being manipulated to bring about a certain result, which I thought was cheating. I thought he cheated in narrative terms as well. In *The Magician's Nephew* the boy Digory's mother is ill, dying of a disease which is not named, but we are invited to assume is cancer. The boy goes into this magic land and comes back with a magic apple which cures her. This is a cheat – a lie. This does not happen. If your mother is dying of cancer there is no magic apple that will save her. It is false comfort. It is offering the child a lie instead of the truth. What makes people better is nature aided by medical science, not supernatural apples from another land which you get if you are a good boy."

The "His Dark Materials" trilogy was inspired by Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a work that Philip Pullman has loved since he was a young man. Although we will not find out exactly what is going on until the last part is published, the whole appears to be concerned with the theme of "War in Heaven." When Pullman was asked in a radio interview if the battle was a spiritual one the answer came, "Spiritual, psychological or evolutionary; it depends on your point of view."

He was Guest of Honour at the recent Oxford Lexicon, held at his own (and Tolkien's) old college, Exeter. During his lecture he made it quite clear that he was an atheist. I won-

dered why he refused to reveal this to a young reader on his Radio Four interview when he was asked directly if he believed in the supernatural.

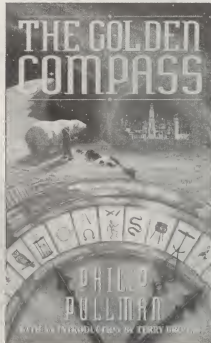
"A child asked me last week, 'Do you believe in God?' and I said, 'I don't actually, but why do you want to know?' She seemed to imply that it mattered whether I meant it or not. I am genuinely puzzled by people wanting to know what I believe. Why do they want to know about me? There is a huge gulf between me, the person, and the book I've written. Of course I believe in it, in the sense that I wouldn't spend seven years on it if I didn't feel committed to what it said, but the idea that I, Philip Pullman, am somehow accountable for what the characters do or say, or everything the narrator says, is something I don't believe – and I have difficulty explaining this to people who have this naive identification between author and narrator."

Was he personally brought up in a faith?

"Yes I was. My father died when I was seven and my brother and I lived with my grandfather for much of our childhood. He was an Anglican priest of a parish in Norfolk. He was a wonderful man and a great story-teller. Every Sunday in my youth was spent in church. I know the Bible very well. I know the prayer book very well. I know *Hymns Ancient and Modern* very well."

What turned him off religion? Was it his father's death?

"No, no, it was growing up. It just seemed that this was not how things were. But it did have an effect. Although I am an atheist I am a Christian atheist – a Church of England atheist."



Philip Pullman was born in 1946 in Norwich and spent part of his early life in Australia and then in North Wales. I asked about childhood influences.

"I read all the books children usually read at that time – Enid Blyton, Arthur Ransome, *Emil and the Detectives*, which was given to me for, I think, my ninth birthday – a wonderful book. I still cherish memories of that one. In Australia I read a most marvellous book called *The Magic Pudding* which has remained my favourite book of all time. I also discovered the great delights of American comic books, *Superman* and *Batman* in particular. That was really the most exciting reading discovery of my childhood. Then I went on to what I thought of as grown-up books, like the Ian Fleming James Bond books."

"I seemed to borrow a lot of books when I was a kid from various elderly people who took an interest in me. I remember an old lady in a village in Wales where I lived when I was about eleven, who let me have the run of her bookshelves – I was very struck by the short stories of H. G. Wells and they made a huge impression on me. Also from somewhere, I can't remember where, I acquired a whole lot of Edgar Rice Burroughs's Tarzan. I thought they were wonderful. I read them from cover to cover. These were the real old pulp stuff."

"And I listened to the radio. *Dick Barton, Special Agent, Journey Into Space* – and in Australia there was a *Superman* radio series. It was before there was television in Australia, so all the kids used to listen to the radio; it was where we got our first stories from. There was an Australian serial called *Clancy of the Outback* – he was a stockman who used to go around doing exciting things."

Did he read any British comics?
"Yes, the *Eagle* from when I was about seven, and I read it with great devotion – wish I'd kept them all! I wrote about *Eagle* a year or two ago in a book about children's publishing since the war, and this involved going to the Bodleian Library to look at a whole year's run. It's a quite extraordinary picture of the time. I'd forgotten all the social comment because you don't notice it when you are a child anyway. It was a very potent time and *Eagle* was part of that modernizing impulse – the Festival of Britain, the National Health Service, the Welfare State. It was a wonderfully optimistic time in social terms and looking back on it gives you a picture of a sort of innocence which we have laid by at some stage."

"I also used to read the *Wizard*, or maybe the *Hotspur*, which I had from the boy next door when he had fin-

ished with them. I liked the long, wordy serials. There was Wilson, the champion runner who ran a three-minute mile, or even a two-minute mile – he had the secret of eternal life because he was a Tibetan guru or something – wonderful stuff. And there was Barry Briggs who was a scrap-metal dealer and part-time goalkeeper who Only Let In One Goal."

Pullman went on to read English at Exeter College. What did he intend to be at that time?

"Oh, my intention was to write a best-selling novel about six weeks after I graduated and make a lot of money and suddenly become rich and famous."

So he was going to be a writer right from the beginning?

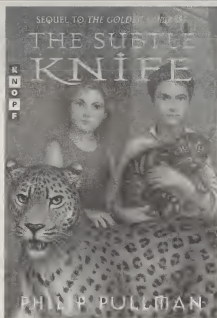
"Well, this is something I don't say. I don't talk about *being* a writer. I always talk about *writing*. I saw recently a nice little story. Stephen Spender apparently said to T. S. Eliot that he very much wanted to be a writer. Eliot said in return he could very much understand someone wanting to write but he couldn't understand someone wanting to be a writer – which put Spender in his place.

"But yes: I always told stories to my friends, to my brother. I wrote them down. I began my first novel the morning after finishing my final exams at Oxford – so the intention was always to write professionally. I had wanted that ever since I realized that the people who wrote the stories I enjoyed got paid for it!"

So what happened with the first novel?

"Well, I got to the end – thought 'this is a load of crap' – and promptly wrote another one and another – and eventually one I was quite pleased with called *Galatea*, which was published. I was teaching by then, because nobody pays you any money at first. My nice little fantasy didn't happen, so I did all sorts of jobs after leaving Oxford. I worked in a library, and in Moss Bros. I finally decided to go into teaching because of the long holidays, which is what everybody used to think. One you don't realize until you are a teacher that teachers really need those long holidays.

"I was about 30 and was teaching here in Oxford, having published an adult book; actually two, but I keep quiet about the first one because it was absolute rubbish. Anyway, when I was at school myself, I had always enjoyed the school play, and I thought I would like to do a school play for the middle-school kids – that's nine-to-13. But there weren't any plays for that age group and the fashion then, in the late 1970s, was for improvised drama, which the children were to develop out



of the circumstances of their own lives and all that sort of stuff. I didn't actually have any ideological objections to that, but I thought I could tell a better story than they could; so I wrote one, in blank verse, just for fun. (It's actually easier because one of the most important qualities in spoken language is rhythm. If you write straightforward prose you have to be exceptionally careful to give a sort of propulsion to it – if you don't it just hangs there in the air.)

"The play was called *Spring-Heeled Jack* and was made into a book. It was melodrama and exaggerated comedy and slapstick. I had a wonderful time doing it and the kids enjoyed it too. And I learned from that that when you do a school play you've got to please several kinds of audience – the kids who are doing it, the parents of the kids who are in it (and it's nice if you can also please some parents whose kids are not in it); also you've got to please the staff whose lessons you disrupted.

"I enjoyed that sort of challenge and wrote five or six plays most of which I turned into books."

Was that how his career as a children's writer got started?

"From that, yes, but (as I said before) it's for everyone." (Pullman has said many times that he never writes for an audience of a particular age. He writes for every and any age and, most particularly, to please himself.)

"I wanted to write something – and this is important – not something that would have a bit of silly stuff for the kids and has a sort of cunning joke that winks at parents over the children's heads, which only adults get. No it's not that at all. It's much more a blend. If you have a story that is genuinely exciting, so that everyone will

want to know what happens next, however old or young they are, certainly if you have funny situations and intriguing characters, whatever age they are, they'll respond.

"Little bits of broad humour are enjoyable by all ages. For example, in *Spring-Heeled Jack* there's a sailor and a barmaid who are lovers, and he's got to go back to sea and they are parting. Nearby is an organ grinder and a monkey and a pie-seller selling hot pies – they are a kind of chorus who keep coming into the story. Anyway, the sailor is saying goodbye to his sweetheart and he says 'here Pullman dropped into the Norfolk accent he often likes to use for his characters', 'Polly, my feelings for you is as warm as that fellow's pies,' and she says, 'Jack, your face will always be as close to my heart as that monkey is to the organ grinder.' And he says, 'Whenever I eat a hot pie I'll think of you!' And she says, 'Whenever I see a monkey I'll think of you!'

"It's a silly old Victorian joke, but the kids liked it because they hadn't heard it before and the adults liked it because it had a feeling of nostalgia – it was the sort of thing they heard when they were kids."

What was this the first of his books to be specifically marketed for children?

"There was an earlier version of *Count Karlstein*, written as a novel without the pictures, published in 1982, I think. It was a bit of a false start because I hadn't found my voice yet. It was told in the voices of the characters – the Wilkie Collins technique."

The current edition of *Count Karlstein*, a part-graphic novel, is an exciting and hilarious tale, a kind of *Babes in the Transylvanian Woods*, with "works consulted and ideas stolen from," among others, "Hammer Films, *The Devil Rides Out* (a film), *The Swiss Police Handbook* (a police handbook) and Carl Maria von Weber, *Der Freischütz* (an opera)."

"Well, steal, steal, steal. That's my motto. If you see something bright and shiny lying around, take it."

Many of the books are written in the style of Victorian melodramas. The Sally Lockhart trilogy, starting with *The Ruby in the Smoke* (1985), is written in a deliberately antiquated style, but includes darker, more serious content.

"It wasn't until *The Ruby in the Smoke* that I discovered the voice that I prefer to tell stories in, the third person."

The Victorian style of the Sally Lockhart books reminded me very much of John Buchan.

"Well, I was writing in homage to the great storytellers of that era – John Buchan of course but also the great comic writers – W. W. Jacobs

(does anybody read him now?), Conan Doyle too, and going back a little earlier, Wilkie Collins. My real period is the end of the 19th century and the Edwardian period. That's where I'm most at home, with that sort of fiction. There was an awful lot of very good stuff about – *The Strand Magazine* for example. I love the sense of humour of that time, like Jerome K. Jerome in *Three Men in a Boat* – very dry, you'd hardly know it was funny if you didn't have your ear attuned: "George went to sleep in a bank from Monday to Friday, etc, etc, but on Saturday they woke him up and put him outside..." And Rider Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines* and *She*, of course."

So the funny, spooky books came first, then Sally Lockhart, still written in the style of a Victorian melodrama but quite serious. There's some very tough stuff in there – tragic deaths of major characters for example, which would fit in with the more recent work.

"I wanted to tell an exciting story and you have to let the story be as serious as it wants to be."

This brought us to *Northern Lights* and *The Subtle Knife*, the first volumes in the "His Dark Materials" trilogy. These books have metamorphosed Pullman from an excellent but terrestrial writer into the brightest of comets. A number of ideas came together with the kind of deceptive inevitability that informs the best art, to create a retelling of the legend of the Fall and maybe of the parts played by Eve and Satan. As well as *Paradise Lost*, the backbone of the story, Pullman was influenced by William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and Blake's comment on Milton that "the reason Milton wrote in fetters about God and the angels, and at liberty when he wrote of devils and hell, was that he was a true poet, and of the devil's party without knowing it." It is Pullman's view that "the Fall is the best thing that happened to us, not the worst, as Christian doctrine teaches, and I venerate Eve as a benefactor."

"The first idea I had, that I could write a long story with a fantastical twist, came from *Paradise Lost*. Then all sorts of other things became attracted to this notion. One of them was the dark matter business. Another was the innocence/experience thing. They all gradually came together."

Staring at the wall one day, or so he says, he suddenly had his "best idea ever." This was that in one of the worlds of his story, everyone is accompanied throughout life by a "daemon" – a familiar, a guardian angel, another self. The daemon manifests as an animal. In childhood it can appear in any animal form but at adolescence it settles into a permanent shape, and that

shape reflects the personality of its human. This latter aspect is crucial to the plot and its theme of the difference between childhood and adulthood, between Innocence and Experience.

The central characters of the stories are two remarkably tough and resourceful children. In *Northern Lights* it is Lyra, "in many ways a coarse and greedy little savage," who sets out to rescue her best friend from a particularly horrible fate. Then, just as we are rooting for Lyra as the best child-hero ever, in *The Subtle Knife*, we meet the brave and steadfast Will, protector of his sick mother and self-confessed murderer.

Pullman, the ex-teacher, insists that both children are in no way exceptional. "I have met hundreds like them," he said in his Guest of Honour talk. In the near-foreground of both books are the powerful and ambivalent figures of the satanic Lord Azriel and his ex-lover, the beautiful and cruel Mrs Coulter.

In his Radio Four interview, some of the children were puzzled as to which characters should be considered bad and which good. They were told that the best way to tell was to be guided by deeds rather than words when it came to judging them. In that context Mrs Coulter and Lord Azriel are pretty horrible, but Philip Pullman had indicated that Mrs Coulter was his favourite character.

"In the story, yes, but I don't think I would like her in real life. I think she is tremendously sexy and attractive, but I would think very hard before accepting a dinner invitation. As a character to write about she is wonderful. She belongs in this line of glamorous and dangerous females that includes the

Snow Queen."

And She-Who-Must-Be-Obedied and Cruella De Ville?

"These archetypes have an imaginative potency."

Her daemon doesn't have a name...

"No, nor does he speak. He doesn't have a name because I couldn't think of one."

Later that day Philip Pullman read a section from the soon-to-be-published final volume *The Amber Spyglass*, in which a thwarted Mrs Coulter and her golden monkey daemon are engaged in a bit of particularly abominable behaviour. As he finished reading the passage her creator commented gleefully, "Good on you, Mrs Coulter." Is the name Coulter significant in any way, because a lot of the others are?

"I don't know where names come from. I knew right away that she was Mrs Coulter. It sounded right, so did Lyra and Will – they sounded right. Some I have to search for. Lee Scorsby, for example, the Lee comes from the actor Lee Van Cleef and the Scorsby because there were father and son Arctic explorers called Scorsby. So a cowboy and the arctic came together as Lee Scorsby."

Seeing that the daemons were his "best idea ever," would he be able to do more with this or will the "His Dark Materials" trilogy be it?

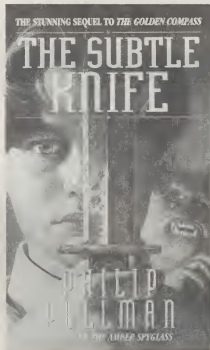
"The segment of Lyra and Will's story has now come to an end."

But there is more to it than just Lyra and Will's story, is there not?

"Well, now we come on to what a story is. A story is a line through certain events. And I draw a rectangle with lots of little dots which represents the world in which the story takes place." (Scrabbles around for paper and pencil.) "The dots represent facts about the world that could be known to the protagonists. So this dot might be Cinderella, this dot the fact that her mother is dead, this dot that she lives with her two ugly sisters, this the invitation to the ball, this the fact that the musicians are all on strike. All of these dots belong to the world of Cinderella, but only some of them to the story. When you tell a story you join up the dots to make the pure line that is the story, then try to tell it as clearly and simply as you can. If you are a self-conscious, postmodern storyteller, you'll do it backwards, or make a mirror image, make it difficult for the reader to understand."

"Will and Lyra's story is represented by a line, but the world of the story is much bigger and other stories could be told."

Getting back to the daemons again, could you always tell if a daemon was not an ordinary animal? There's a bit in *The Subtle Knife* when Will (who



comes from our daemonless world) first sees Lyra's daemon and he thinks it's an animal. In Lyra's world, if someone walked in with a cat, would you know if it was a daemon?

"You would know at once it was a daemon. Don't ask me how. When Lyra sees the witch's daemon on the ship she knows right away it's a daemon and not an ordinary goose. That's why she's frightened because it's alone, and in her bit of the world you can't be separated from your daemon."

Could you use daemons practically? For example, if you had a daemon horse could you ride it?

"I haven't really thought about it. That kind of thing wouldn't help the story." (In accordance with one of Pullman's storytelling principles, "Whatever doesn't add, subtracts.")

Can one daemon kill another and if it did would it kill the person?

"I don't know."

The reason I asked was that the only real query I had with Lyra's parallel Brytain/Oxford, was that the fact of the existence of daemons would have had an incredibly strong effect on history. I found it a little difficult to believe that their history would have been so similar to ours.

"There's an awful lot you have to leave out. There's just that one line through the story."

One of the many enigmas (to be resolved, we are promised, in the final part, *The Amber Spyglass*), is the nature of Dust, the strange "dark material" being investigated by Mrs Coulter and her minions. Which came to mind first, the quote from *Paradise Lost* about "his dark materials" or the scientific idea of cold dark matter in the universe?

"Cold dark matter came first. It's a wonderful gift for a writer, this notion of the universe filled with this stuff that nobody knows what it is. I've been keeping my fingers crossed that nobody discovers what it is before the third book is published."

Did he realize, at the time of writing, that this enterprise was to be his Big Thing?

"No, you can't tell what sort of impact it will make. You can't tell if anybody is going to read it or not. I was writing it for me."

In the second Sally Lockhart novel, *The Shadow in the North*, a particularly obnoxious murderer is killed and the episode ends he "fell forward into everlasting horror." Is that really what happens to evil people?

"No. That was a rhetorical flourish... Ha ha! You mustn't confuse me with the narrator of my novels."

He is never the narrator of his novels?

"No, there is always a difference."

This is what I used to find the hardest notion in all literature to explain to undergraduates."

Where do Philip Pullman's own children fit in? Do they get advance sight of the novels?

"I have two sons aged 18 and 27. They saw them as soon as they were ready, but not before. I did tell them stories as children, but didn't tell them *these* stories. The stuff I write I prefer to keep private until it's ready to be looked at by somebody else. I don't show it to anyone, no friends, no relations, until I've done all the work I want to do on it. I can't understand how you can show your work to anyone before it's ready. People ask me to teach creative writing from time to time. I can't do it. It seems to involve discussing your work with other people and letting them tear it to pieces. I couldn't do that to save my life."

This seems to fit in with Pullman's care not to reveal too much of himself. He is charming but elusive. Perhaps this sense of something dangerous under the surface, a whiff of sulphur, spills over into his most celebrated work and adds to its appeal.

And this is his own ideal of himself, as described in his lecture of the previous day: a man sitting in a market-place, a born storyteller "with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner." **IZ**

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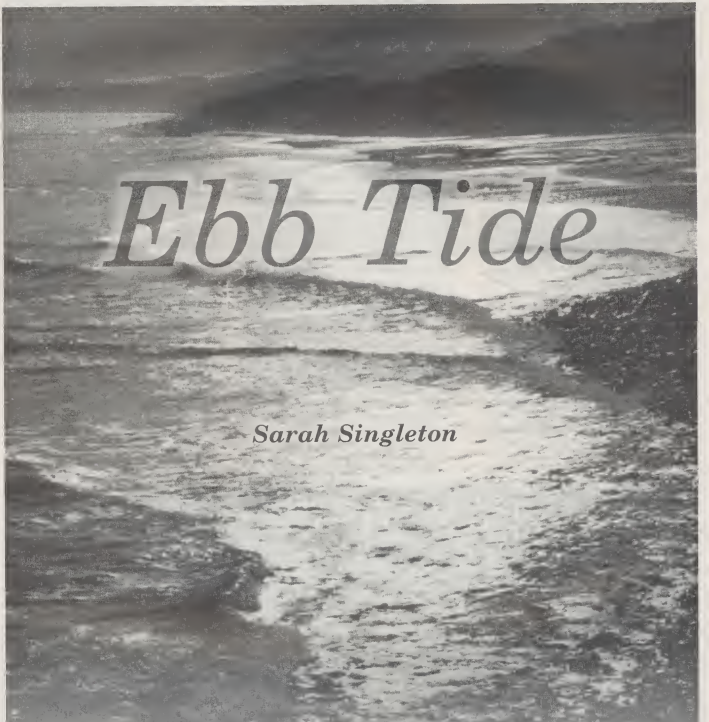
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Ebb Tide

Sarah Singleton

He ran along the lane, through the gloomy cloister of beech and hawthorn. Up, and up, leaping choked puddles and soft pockets of mud. At the clifftop, he burst from the dim, dank woodland onto bald rock, overlooking the grey sweep of the sea and the blue-grey mantle of sky. The wind rose, a cold tongue on the perspiration soaking his shirt. Then he skipped off again, scrabbling down the stony lane through the rock, to the village folded away at the root of the valley, at the edge of the sea.

At the top of the village, Jake knocked on the door of a cottage.

"Mr Ainslie. Mr Ainslie!" He stepped back from the doorstep. The little window was dark. Jake choked on

frustration. He stamped his foot on the path, and dug his nails into the palm of his hand.

"Mr Ainslie!" he shouted again, on the verge of tears. At the side of the cottage, the gate latch clinked. A very tall, white-haired man peered out. He regarded Jake uneasily.

"What do you want? Is something the matter?"

"Mr Ainslie. I... I found something. I thought you might..." Jake's face crumpled. The tide of excitement carrying him on the long, hard run to the house, that had prompted him, unthinking, to call on the old man, had ebbed away. Stranded, he struggled for words.

"I found something. On the beach. I came to tell you."

"What? What did you find?" Ainslie shut the gate. His shoulders were stooped, but he towered above Jake. He

wore a neat tweed suit and a tie, a flat cap, and brown shoes, expensive and well-polished.

"What did you find?" he repeated.

"I." Jake drew back. What had he seen? His hands trembled. The image blurred.

"A mermaid," he blurted. "A dead mermaid. On the rocks, in the next cove. I think it was a mermaid. It was. It was, I'm sure." He could hear the drumming of his pulse.

"It was," he repeated. "I ran all the way here. To tell you."

Ainslie didn't speak. Cautiously, Jake raised his eyes from the old man's brown shoes.

"I see," Ainslie said at last. He took off his glasses and pressed his fingers against his eyes. "Will you show me?" he said, with a faint tremor in his voice. A posh accent. An old-fashioned, upper-class voice, like the English officers in black-and-white war films.

Ainslie collected his waxed jacket. His mind had jammed in a kind of seizure. Outside, the thin purple-haired youth was hopping about like a bird. A gawky, decorated boy, about 19, still a little childish. Ainslie tried to think. How did the boy know? Who had told him? Was this some kind of trick? Ainslie drew his glossy oak walking stick from the coat rack.

The boy led the way, along the footpath to the clifftop, through the wood, and down again the other side into the next cove. Last year's leaves patterned the drab mud underfoot. Although he was fit, Ainslie found it hard to keep pace with the boy, who hurried ahead, waited impatiently, then hurried ahead again.

The cove opened like a mouth in the cliff, a tongue of dun brown boulders licking the hem of the sea. The cliff stepped back unevenly, tenacious shrubs gripping the rock, suspended with roots dangling, as the land fell away, inch by precarious inch.

"This way, this way," the boy called, a crow in black, against the greys of the sea, sky and stone. He jumped lightly from rock to rock.

"Over here! It's here!" The boy waved his arms in the air. Ainslie looked about warily.

"Here. Look. See? I told you."

The mermaid had washed up into a rockpool, scooped like a bowl in a mound of glistening limestone, with leathery bladderwrack, soft pink anemones and pebbles. She lay half-submerged, face down, torso bobbing gently in the cold salt water, tail draped heavily across the rough stone. Ainslie took a deep breath. He stepped closer. He clapped his hand across his nose and mouth.

"Stinks, doesn't she?" the boy grinned. "Rotten fish. Been in the air too long."

Ainslie inhaled carefully, but he couldn't avoid the stench. He took out a white handkerchief from his pocket, to hold against his face. A large, round chunk had been bitten from the mermaid's tail. Inside the wound, the flesh was the colour of pearl, bloodless, jutting curved slivers of transparent bone. Suspended in the pool, the dark green streamers of her hair drifted in the seaweed.

"What's your name?" Ainslie asked the boy, who had picked up a curved antler of driftwood, smooth and brittle from the sea.

"Jake," the boy said. "Jake the Rake." He prodded the dense, inert mass of the mermaid's body with his stick.

"Don't do that!" Ainslie shot out.

Jake recoiled. Then he rallied. "She can't feel it. She's dead," and then sulky, "anyway, she's not yours, Mr Ainslie. I found her."

Ainslie frowned. "Have you seen her face?"

Jake shook his head. His ears glittered with metal hoops. And he had a ring in his nose, and another in his eyebrow. Half a dozen pendants hung around his neck. Ainslie grimaced, despite himself. For a moment, the hapless boy with his distasteful body-piercings and coloured hair disturbed him far more than the fish-woman rotting at his feet.

"Will you help me turn her over?" Ainslie asked.

Jake pulled a face, suddenly squeamish. "Touch her? She's all smelly and slimy." Then he changed his mind. He hopped down from the rock.

"Grab her shoulders. Carefully. She's slippery. Don't bruise her on the rock." Ainslie stooped and slid his hands beneath her hips, where her body swelled into the fish-tail. His hands found no purchase, so he pushed against her with his chest and shoulders. The body flopped over. Patches of silver skin had torn from her tail, dried and stuck to the rock where she had lain so long. The boy cooed, gazing at her face.

"Let me see," Ainslie said. He leaned over, looking through the glinting surface of the pool to the face beneath the water. The eyes were gone. Pale flesh sockets, holes in her head where the fish had nibbled. A thin nose. Her mouth hung open, lipless, tongueless, a straight tunnel down into her body, lined with narrow barbs. Her breasts were very shallow, scales about the nipples. Torn, translucent fins jutted from her sides below the ribs. Her fingers were webbed, bleached white.

They sat upon the rocks near the body. The waves rose and fell. Jake fiddled with his stick, pattering a rhythm on the pebbles. What now? Mr Ainslie gazed at the mermaid, lost in thought.

What now?

The question echoed in Jake's head. He assumed Mr Ainslie would know the procedure – what should be done in such a case, who to contact. Mr Ainslie collected curiosities from the beach. He walked for miles, everyone knew, looking for driftwood, shaped stones, fragments of coloured glass worn smooth by the sea. And other stuff too, which he gave to the village museum. Old fishing equipment, antique floats, ships in bottles, Ainslie's name inscribed on the information card underneath, "Kindly donated by..." But Mr Ainslie seemed at a loss. He was staring out to sea, squinting in the sunshine.

"What now?" Jake said aloud, the words repeated in his mind so often they sounded absurd, spoken out.

Mr Ainslie shifted, recalled to the present.

"Shouldn't we tell someone?" Jake said.

But Mr Ainslie shook his head. "No such thing," he said. "Mermaids, that is. If we talk about it – we'll have the newspapers here, gawping and taking pictures. Then the police, the authorities. They'll take her away and

they'll discover she's a fake. A hoax. The papers will explain, the fuss will die down, and that will be end of it."

Jake bit his lip. "So that's it?" he said. "A waste of time, me finding her?"

Mr Ainslie turned impatiently. "No. Why is it a waste of time? You saw her. So did I. We know she's real. What does it matter about anyone else?"

"So what shall we do?"

"I think we should cover up the body. Protect it from seabirds. Make sure nobody else finds her. Then tomorrow morning, on the ebb tide, I'll bring a boat round, and we can take her out from the coast, a long way, and let the sea have her back."

Jake nodded, disappointed. He had expected something more. But what? Miraculous, this creature, lying on the rock, and he had discovered her. He wanted some kind of recognition. A party, or a celebration, events to flower out from the seed of his find. He wanted to explain, but Mr Ainslie seemed gruff and distant.

So they moved the mermaid, working in concert, lifting her in the cradle of their arms, further away from the sea. Mr Ainslie draped his coat upon the body, and this they carefully covered with stones. The burial took some time, and when at last the mermaid was obscured to the old man's satisfaction, the sun was low above the sea. They walked heavily back to the village. At the cottage, Mr Ainslie paused on the doorstep, and asked Jake if he would like to come in for a drink and a wash. Jake hesitated, suddenly shy.

"No, it's okay. Thanks. I'd better be off. I'll see you tomorrow, yes?"

Then he was off, along the steep cobbled path, where the houses tottered down to the sea.

Ainslie shut the door. He washed his hands thoroughly, removing the rotten-fish taint from his skin. He splashed warm water onto his face. The cottage was very dim and quiet. Outside he could hear a gull's solitary screech and, distantly, the murmur of the sea.

He was shaken, deep down, to the roots. Time cheated. He had put so many years behind him and still the distant event rose up, as close as ever, like yesterday. Sitting by the sea he had wanted to speak – to tell Jake – but the words shrivelled in his throat, self-containment a habit of years. Too old to change. Not like the brazen, modern people, baring their souls, without dignity, tumbling out secrets and pains to their self-help groups, counsellors, television chat-show hosts.

He poured himself a whisky, and sat in the evening twilight. Fifty years, it had been. Half a century. Before even Jake's mother was born. And still, the memory was like a sore spot, to be poked.

He had been 28, not so much older than Jake, and lieutenant commander of *HMS Triton*, a submarine prowling the Norwegian coast, confined in the rumbling, metallic cold, stretches of sombre boredom salted with intervals of fighting and fear. Surfaced one morning, in the leached, bitter pre-dawn light, Ainslie was standing on the bridge when the *Triton* was fired on unexpectedly. A salvo of four. When the first torpedo passed, Ainslie rec-

ognized the hot shale-oil smell from the exhaust.

"That's one of ours!"

Another British submarine had mistaken the *Triton* for a German U-boat. The second and third torpedoes ploughed into the *Triton*, tearing a wound in its side. The greedy, icy water filled the submarine.

Ainslie fell into the sea's cold embrace, and the shock knocked the sense from his body. Waves thrust salt fingers in his mouth and throat. Then – uncanny, lightless silence, the water closed above his head. Down, and down, into the sea's unfathomable darkness. His bright consciousness flared, a blaze of sunlit memories, then dwindled, close to snuffing out, when he heard a thin, unearthly singing. Long, arching strains, like the calling of whales. The echoes ribboned eerily through the water, almost tangible. Then Ainslie was lifted, his head thrust above the surface into the light and noise. He choked and coughed, gulping the burning air into his body. The waves beat him down, but something held him free of the sea's ravenous grip. Then he heard a shout. The other British sub. He'd been spotted. He was pulled from the water. The only survivor. When he looked back, a blurred white face appeared beneath the waves. A thin pearly hand lifted briefly, and then a glimpse of emerald, the smooth, shining flanks.

He was granted four weeks' leave. He stayed in the village, visiting his godfather who owned the run-down manor house at the top of the valley. A blazing June, the sunburnt children running and screeching by the sea, possible, almost, to forget about the war, with the fishing boats working as usual, and the food plentiful. But Ainslie wasn't ready for a holiday, watching women chatting and laughing in the dappled, rosy light beneath the trees, while the bodies of his comrades still drifted in the black Norwegian Sea. He walked for miles along the coast, by the sea's deceitful, tranquil blue, eyes upon the horizon, as though he might see the submarines, far out. He felt a peculiar hollow in his chest. Maybe in the final drowning moments, the sea had taken a part of him. Guilt needed, for allowing the *Triton* to be caught on the surface. For surviving.

Ainslie wandered in the heat across the shingle, a light breeze tugging the sleeves of his white shirt. She was sitting on a rock, combing her hair.

She had her back to him – a naked, slender back, skin white as milk. And curious silver-blond hair, very long and thick, blowing in strands. Taken back, Ainslie halted and coughed decorously. He turned away, kicked noisily at a pebble, so the girl would be able to cover herself. But the image burned like a brand. He heard a laugh. He turned again. She was regarding him over her shoulder. The moment stretched. He knew he was reckoned handsome, with his heroic height and bright blue eyes. Once his photo had been printed on the front page of *The Times*. "*Triton* does it again!" He had found it hard to connect with the grave, clear-eyed young man in the picture. Now, seeing through the girl's eyes, he took possession of himself.

"Just a moment," she called. She bent over, retrieving a blouse which she buttoned on carelessly. She swung round two long legs, feet bare on the sunburnt beach. An unexpected desire flickered.

Julia was a London exile, working on a farm for a dour

farmer and his hostile, suspicious wife. She told Ainslie about the heavy, physical toil, and the loneliness. The farm was four miles away from the village, so her valiant effort for the war had amounted to an indefinite sentence of utter isolation. Clearing ditches, cutting back the dense, overgrown hedgerows, and shovelling the stinking litter from the cowsheds. Ainslie didn't mention the *Triton*, and Julia did not elaborate upon her home life in London. For a few weeks, the shingle cove was an enchanted place, an enclosure cordoned away from the stream of life, and from the war. Whenever she could get away, Julia would meet him there. She shocked and delighted him, peeling off her clothes to spring into the sea. She flexed her muscles, boasting of her new strength. Her skin, sun-hot, tasted of stone and salt. When he lay upon her, his back burning and his face against her throat, her hair brushed against his shoulders, soft as feathers. Almost, he could forget the hollow space in his chest. Almost, the cold black seawater running in his veins warmed through.

Then abruptly, the charmed space closed. He was called back, to take charge of a new submarine, another iron coffin to bury him beneath the sea. He couldn't find Julia, to tell her he was leaving.

He took too many risks, and decorations. At the end of the war, visiting his godfather, he heard the tittle-tattle about the former land girls and their immoral ways. One locally, he learned, had been sent home in disgrace after giving illegitimate birth to a deformed child. A little boy, with his toes and fingers webbed like a fish. Stricken with horror, Ainslie tried to find her—Julia the needle in London's inestimable haystack. But Julia and his son had disappeared, just like the *Triton* and her crew. Obscurely Ainslie was afraid that the sea was exacting its due, that Julia had paid for his escape. He stayed in the navy. When he retired, nearly 20 years ago now, he moved to the village, waiting patiently at the ocean's hem.

Jake went to the Black Ship, half way down the cobbled street. In the bar, half a dozen weathered, grey-haired men had called in for a drink. The fishing trade had died away. In high season, the remaining seamen ran tourist pleasure trips around the coast, or tended the weekenders' brightly-coloured yachts. They stood at the bar, diminished and dispirited, resigned to their place at the tattered tail end of a fishing history.

"Who's this, then? What daft colour d'you call that?" one of the men gestured to Jake's hair. The others grinned. Jake had grown up around them. His efforts to alter and adorn himself amused rather than shocked, and Jake winced as he hurried past into the lounge where his own peers gathered. Jake the fake. He had to leave this godforsaken nowhere-ville, indeed he did, to forge a separate self, an individuality. Here he was a child still, a joke for the old fools. He heard them laugh again, from the far side of the bar.

Two fledgling bikers, kids in leather jackets and Iron Maiden t-shirts, sipped lager at a table in the lounge. In an alcove by the empty fireplace, a skinny, black-haired girl of 17 was gazing blankly about the room. She fiddled with a beer mat, turning it over and over. Then she drew

out a packet of cigarettes and lit up, breathing out smoke in a long, bored sigh. She leaned forward, propping her elbows on the table. Silky, ebony tresses fell forward across her cheek.

"Hey, Jake," she said.

"Dawn, you okay?"

Dawn shrugged heavily. "Fed up. You know."

"You meeting someone?"

She shrugged again. Then some thought occurred, for momentarily her face brightened. She rummaged in the pocket of her velvet jacket.

"Look," she said, thrusting a creased flyer towards Jake. "The Dead Girls. They're playing in town tonight. Have you got any money? If you could lend me some, we could hitch in."

Briefly Jake's hopes rose, but he'd squandered his last coins on a half pint of beer.

"No," he said. "I'm broke."

They lapsed into silence, in the curls of cigarette smoke. Dawn folded the flyer. From a pool of shadow, she fixed her gaze on the window, as though it might open onto some more tempting prospect. Absent-minded, she brushed flecks of ash from her skirt. She ran her fingers through her hair, bored, but studiously elegant. And Jake was entranced, as ever.

The secret burned.

Like a hot coal in his pocket, like a treasure he'd foolishly agreed to cast back down into the earth and cover. The promise chafed. Somewhere, somehow, Ainslie's plan had a rightness, a dignity. But... but... what a gem, what a prize, to lay at the feet of the princess. Jake wrangled with his conscience. Dawn drew out another cigarette.

Finally, she stood up. On the brink of tears.

"I'm going home," she said, in a kind of violence. Jake hesitated for a moment. Then he dashed out after her, down the cobbled street. The houses rose darkly each side, the vista of the leaden sea filling the U in between.

"Dawn, Dawn, are you okay?" He caught her easily.

"What apart from being bored witless? Apart from feeling everything's happening without me? Well, yes, apart from that I am okay." Her voice was choked, and she looked away from him, to the sea.

"Dawn, I..." Jake began. He quivered. Something caught in his chest, an impediment he had to breach.

"Dawn, I..." he repeated.

"What?" she said sharply. She took a step away, her face now hostile, anticipating some unwelcome revelation of feelings.

"I found something you might want to see," he said in a rush. "Something exciting. And weird. You won't be bored, no, it's amazing. I'll show you."

"What?" she said again, curious now.

"A mermaid." He forced the words. For a moment, they hung in the air. The dim, deserted street seemed to tense, straining to hear. A flicker of hope in Dawn's face, then: "Yeah. Sure, Jake. Go away, will you? Leave me alone." She turned away, scuffing the cobbles.

"Dawn, it's true. It's true, honestly, I swear. I'll take you there right now, I'll show you. A dead mermaid, we covered her with stones." He seized her arm, pulling her to

a halt. Again, he was conscious of the words ringing out, the eerie sense of unseen listeners, and his own treachery.

"Where is it?" she said cautiously.

"In the next cove. Get a torch, I'll show you."

"You'd better be telling the truth Jake, or I'll never speak to you again."

But she hurried home and found a torch.

In the cove they could hear the boom of the waves, the rocks smooth and grey like mushrooms, in the torch's beam. Dawn moaned, about her soiled clothes, cold feet, twisted ankle. Jake hurried here and there, tense and anxious, trying to find the burial mound. In the isolated patches of illumination the cove was a puzzle of disconnected pieces. He hopped about, from stone to stone, frantically pulling at the pebbles.

Then – at last – he found it. A corner of Ainslie's waxed coat peeped from a pile of stones.

"Yes, yes, yes," he murmured, hefting the stones away.

"Dawn! Dawn! I've found it! Over here."

She hurried over. Reverently, Jake folded back the coat. The fetid stink rose from the body, the white face bleached in the torchlight. Jake pulled the coat right off, exposing the battered fish tail. Tiny beetles scuttled from the wound, in the electric glare.

"Well?" he said, at last. "I told you. Didn't I?"

Dawn crouched beside the mermaid. She stretched out her hand. Not quite daring to touch, the hand hovered above the dead face. Then, gingerly, she brushed the white cheek with her fingertips.

"Cold," she said gently, "She's beautiful. But very fishy too. A mermaid. A real mermaid." She repeated the phrase a few more times, as though she was nailing it down for herself, so it shouldn't slip away.

"We should've brought a camera," she said. "So people'll believe us. Just wait till we tell them!"

Jake felt a chill in his heart. The secret was leaking away. "No," he said suddenly. "No, we mustn't tell anyone else. You mustn't. Tomorrow morning, Commander Ainslie and me, we're going to give her back to the sea."

Jake flicked the torch's beam from the mermaid to Dawn's face.

She shaded her eyes, blinded. "Don't! Stop it!"

He lowered the light.

Her face, half-lit, was puzzled and annoyed. "You can't," she said. "A real mermaid! We've got to tell people, so they'll believe too. We discovered her. We'll be in the papers. We'll be famous!"

Sensing her thoughts, Jake shared them. An unrolling sequence, of interviews, press photographs (he and Dawn together), a television appearance, hanging out with the Dead Girls... Being where it was at. Whatever "it" was. Life, the world. The Elsewhere everything seemed to happen.

Jake covered the mermaid. He replaced the stones carefully.

A milky mist drifted above the still, slaty surface of the sea. Ainslie rowed steadily, the dip and rise of the oars disturbing the silky water. Droplets glistened.

On the shore he could see the red flash of Jake's hairy jumper. The boy was jumping up and down, impatient at the water's edge. He waved his arms and shouted, but Ainslie couldn't hear what he said. The tide was sinking, almost at its lowest point. Between the rocks in the cove and the sea's edge a stretch of sleek brown sand had opened. In the shallows, Ainslie jumped from the boat and heaved it out of the water.

"She's gone, Mr Ainslie, she's gone." Jake danced about him, getting in the way.

Ainslie stood up slowly. "What?"

"The mermaid. She's gone. And it's all my fault. Oh my god, it's all my fault, I'm so sorry Mr Ainslie, you told me not to tell and I did, I'm sorry." Jake sat upon a rock with his head in his hands and wept, an unmanly, undisciplined, wretched little boy.

Unwilling as yet to digest this piece of news, Ainslie walked up the beach. Four metal stakes had been thrust into the ground, an orange plastic ribbon threaded between them. The mermaid had disappeared. Ainslie regarded the scene with chilly incomprehension, a kind of frozen grief. The empty space in his chest began to hurt.

High up, on the cliff-top, two uniformed figures looked down.

"Jake," Ainslie said quietly. "Get the boat in the water. They'll want to talk to us. To me. They'll have found my coat. I'm not ready, not right now. Get in."

"Oy! Wait there!" Seeing them make for the sea, a policeman called down. Ainslie jumped in the boat, and grabbed the oars. They pushed off and headed out to sea.

He rowed in silence for a while, till the shore receded, and the cove was one among many. Jake rubbed his eyes with his knuckles, his cheeks shiny with tears.

"I'm sorry," he said. Ainslie nodded. He felt very old and tired, just then, too weary to be angry. No wonder the boy had been so evasive and subdued, in the pale of dawn, when he'd bidden him walk to the cove, while he rowed the boat from the harbour.

The sun burned away the mist. The sea shone a dull silver, like a tarnished mirror.

The mermaid. A sign, a revelation. What had it proved? He remembered the long descent into the Norwegian Sea, the heat sucked from his body, the darkness. A mermaid had slipped her arms around him.

He shut his eyes, recalling the pressure of her hard, sinuous body against his chest and the seaweed drift of her hair on his face. She had borne him up, to the turbulent face of the sea. In the intervening years he had doubted this to be true. A dream of some kind, a fantasy conjured in the far reaches of his sinking mind, the vision of a drowning man. And then it had become an obsession, finding a proof of the mermaid, as though this improbable, inexplicable event was the key to all the other happenings – the sinking of the *Triton*, the wasted lives of the crew, the loss of Julia and his son. If a mermaid had risen from the depths to save his life... perhaps a providence of sorts was at work. Maybe a pattern could be drawn.

Except that it hadn't worked out that way. He had seen the dead mermaid, the unambiguous cold flesh. The eyeless face, the tail, the bones. And he hadn't been given an

answer.

He looked up at Jake, who was sitting up straighter now, looking out at the sea in wonderment.

"Once, a mermaid kissed me," Ainslie said. Jake regarded him, eyes wide.

"When?"

And Ainslie told him. About the submarine, the attack from their own side, the breach in the *Triton*. As he spoke, he couldn't stop his eyes watering. Hot tears, burning his face.

"I bet it was frightening, trapped in a submarine. I'd hate it," Jake said.

Ainslie assented.

"You know," Jake went on, "Old people – they're always saying we're no good. That they fought the war for us, and how ungrateful we are, and all that. It's not true. It isn't." His voice wavered, he struggled for the right words.

"It's like – those wars are in our bones. And there hasn't been a day of my life when there hasn't been a war going on, and every night on the news I see wars, and children killed, and cities bombed and all that. Sometimes I think we're always in the war. Sometimes I think it must have been good to know what side was the right one, to know what to fight for."

Ainslie looked at Jake, in his scarlet jumper, the jewellery twinkling in his nose and ears. He looked again, with a curious sense of compassion.

Peculiar, to be sitting in the little boat like this, adrift upon the spreading sea. The oars dipped, and lifted.

Sarah Singleton

"I thought she'd poisoned me somehow, the mermaid," Ainslie said. "Some kind of pollution. I had a son once, you see. I never met him. I lost him. But they told me he had webbed fingers and toes."

To Ainslie's surprise, Jake erupted with laughter. Unsettling how quickly his mood could change, flitting from gravity to levity. Changeable, indeed, as the sea.

"Don't be silly!" Jake said. "Quite a few babies are born like that – some kind of development not working out properly before the baby's born. It runs in families. Look!" He held up his hand, displaying thin pink scars, like seams, running between his fingers.

"And my dad was the same," he added brightly. "Don't you know anything?"

Ainslie was taken aback. He thought for a moment, shaking his head. "There is a great deal I don't know," he admitted. "I'm an old man Jake. And I'm worn out. Perhaps you could row?"

Jake jumped to his feet, rocking the boat. He fooled with the oars, splashing and making little headway. When Ainslie offered advice, Jake argued flamboyantly.

They made slow progress to the shore.

Sarah Singleton lives in Chippenham, Wiltshire, and the above is her third story for *Interzone*. The first two were "Cassilago's Wife" (issue 137) and "Balthazar's Demon" (issue 151).

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The Atelier

Zoran Živković

When the bell rang at the front door, the silence in my atelier seemed to implode, like a balloon that has suddenly lost all its air.

I turned away from the computer screen where I had been sitting for a long time, and looked at the door in bewilderment. Before I start to write, I always turn off both the telephone and the intercom. It is impossible to reach me then. If someone calls me on the phone, they will think I'm away from home, or don't want to answer, and if someone rings at the entrance to the building downstairs, I won't hear it at all and will thus be unable to let him in. But someone had obviously entered, someone whom I hadn't let in, and was now standing in front of my door.

I got up irritably and headed for the front door of the atelier. I can't stand being interrupted while working. No one has the right to disturb me, particularly now that my time is running out. I couldn't imagine who it might be. It certainly could not be someone from the building dropping by for a visit, because I had not cultivated even the most attenuated friendship with any of my neighbours. The most I do is to exchange polite remarks on the rare occasions I meet someone in the hall or elevator. I don't even know the names of the people who live on my floor.

Maybe it was a door-to-door salesman who had somehow entered the building and was now peddling from apartment to apartment something I certainly didn't need. I should have stayed at my desk, without giving myself away. Even the most persistent intruder would give up after a while, concluding that there was no one home. But since I had already come to the door, I put my eye to the peephole and peered out. I realized just then that I had never done this before, simply because there had been no need to check out any visitor. I always knew who was ringing the bell.

In front of the door to my atelier stood a distinctly

elderly

gentleman. He was short and thin, wearing a hat and a dark coat, and a dark-red bow tie. I had never seen him before. He couldn't have been a door-to-door salesman, not only because of his advanced age, but also because he was not carrying any bag for whatever he might have been selling. All he was holding was a rather small book. He took off his hat and bowed to me, and I moved back from the peephole in embarrassment. I'd had no idea that you could tell from the outside when someone was looking through it.

There was no longer any sense in pretending I wasn't there. I had to open the door; but whatever happened, I was determined it should be brief. The gentleman had undoubtedly made a mistake. He had surely come to visit someone else in the building, and then turned up at my door by mistake, for it had no nameplate on it. I could not, however, be of much assistance in directing him to wherever he wanted to go.

"Hello," I said, opening the door halfway. "May I help you?"

The man did not reply at once. He just looked at me,

smiling slightly. We stood like that in silence for a few moments.

"Don't you recognize me?" he said at last. He had a rough, elderly voice, but with an element of good cheer.

"I'm afraid not," I replied in surprise. "Should I?"

"I believe so. Who else, if not you?"

"Please don't hold it against me," I said after a short hesitation, "but I don't seem to recall when we met. Would you please remind me? With whom do I have the honour?"

Holding his hat in his hand, the old man bowed again. "I cannot tell you my name, unfortunately, since you did not give me one. I am a character from one of your stories who remained nameless. But so it is with many of your characters, is it not?"

I sized up the stranger angrily. "I don't know what you want, sir, or why you came here," I said, raising my voice slightly, "but I certainly don't have time for tasteless jokes. You interrupted me in the middle of very important work. Such conduct is not tolerated in polite society. Please leave."

I started to close the door, but his next words halted me.

"Your work is important, but you're making heavy weather of it."

"Excuse me?" The door that was almost shut opened a little.

"Your writing. You have written five stories, and would like one more, a final one. Without it your book will be incomplete. But you seem to have run out of inspiration. Not a single letter has appeared on your screen for days, and you can afford to fritter away no more time, isn't that so?"

"Who are you? What is the meaning of this?" I tried to sound sharp, even wrathful, but a quaver in my voice betrayed me.

"I am someone you might find useful. If, of course, you invite me in." He looked briefly from side to side. "It would not be quite proper to talk about it here, in front of the door."

I made no move, not knowing what to do. All of this was completely insane. The old man standing in front of me clearly could not be who he claimed to be, but, on the other hand, he could not possibly have known what he had just said. No one knew that but me. The seconds moved ponderously, crushing me with their growing weight.

"Maybe this will dispel your doubts," my visitor said at last, handing me the book he was holding.

I took it hesitantly, thinking as I did that it was irrational. I should cut off this senseless encounter at once, simply close the door without further ado; maybe even slam it shut. You have to act firmly with oddballs, even those of polished demeanour and advanced years. But curiosity, plus a certain vague premonition, prevailed over rationality.

It was a paperback book, not very thick, with a shiny, plastic-laminated cover. I turned it over to the front and squinted at it. Under my name was the title in large letters: *Impossible Encounters*.

I raised my bewildered eyes to the elderly gentleman, who was still smiling. I realized that I was expected to say something, but nothing coherent crossed my mind. This book could not exist, if only because it had yet to be written. The last chapter was missing. The computer screen on which it was supposed to appear gaped behind me, completely white.

"Where did you get this?" I finally stammered.

"May I not come in?" the stranger persisted.

I hesitated only briefly before opening the door almost all the way, stepping back. The old man passed by me, then stopped in my small hall. At first I didn't understand why he had done this, then I realized what was expected of me.

"With your permission," I said and took his hat, then his long, heavy coat. I had to put the book under my arm for a moment in order to hang them on the coat rack next to the front door. "After you," I said, indicating the atelier's main room.

Once inside, the visitor turned this way and that, looking around but saying nothing, just nodding his head. He was wearing a dark blue suit of old-fashioned cut with wide lapels. A handkerchief matching his bow tie peeped delicately from his upper jacket pocket. He waited for me to invite him to sit down, then chose the couch to the right of the door. For a moment I was uncertain as to where I myself should sit, and then I chose the armchair next to the desk, under the lamp with the large yellow shade, so that we faced each other.

"Where did you get this?" I asked, repeating the question that had not been answered.

"From you, of course."

"From me?"

"Yes, you left the book on the coffee table next to the jug and two glasses. In the room that is entered from the hallway with portraits. Several drops fell on the cover as I was pouring water. Certainly you remember?"

I shook my head slowly, more in disbelief than because I could not remember.

He indicated the book in my hand. "In the first story. The first chapter, actually. 'The Window.'"

I opened the book and started to leaf through it with stiff movements. It was truly there, on the seventh page: "1. THE WINDOW." I read the short introductory sentence and then looked at my visitor again.

"As you know," he continued, "I am not exceptional in this regard. The other characters were given the book, too. It appears in each of the stories, although not always the same edition. The Old Man is sitting on it at the top of the ascent, above the clouds. The Bookseller has it on the shelf among his recent acquisitions. The Banker is reading it on the train. And finally, the Priest carries it with him when he withdraws into the confessional for his afternoon nap. You did well to give it to us. If it weren't for the book, this encounter could not have taken place. Regardless of which us came here, you would never have let him inside unless he could present the book."

"But none of that is real. I mean..." I knew quite well what I wanted to say, but for some reason I suddenly

couldn't put it into words.

"But what is real? Didn't you write *Impossible Encounters* in order to show that there is no distinct boundary separating the real from the unreal? In any case, were we to stick unconditionally to the real, we would be unable to help you at all."

"Help me?"

"Yes. What did the doctor tell you – how much more do you have? Two, at most three months, isn't that so?"

"How do you know?" My voice had dropped almost to a whisper.

"We know all about you, of course. That is quite natural. No one knows a writer as well as the characters from his own books. Just as you know us perfectly well, when it comes right down to it."

My head was spinning slowly. One part of my consciousness was still trying to make some sort of sense of all this, but in vain. I had cancelled my entitlement to any acceptable sense the moment I got up from my desk and headed for the door to see who was there. And maybe even quite a bit earlier, in fact. Back when I wrote the first sentence of *Impossible Encounters*.

"How would you be able help me?" I asked, my voice still low. "If you know what the doctor told me, then it must be clear to you that there is no reprieve. Soon I will have to go back to the hospital, and this time I will never leave it."

"There is no reprieve, yes, but only in the medical sense. That is not what this is about, however."

"Then what is it about?"

"You will soon die physically, and that is inevitable, unfortunately. But you might join us beforehand."

"Join you?"

"That's right."

"How can I do that?"

"It's quite simple. You want to add one more chapter to *Impossible Encounters*, isn't that so? Fine, write a story about yourself as a writer. Introduce yourself into it as a character."

"What would I gain by that? I mean, it would just be... let me put it this way, dead letters on paper. Unreal..." It was not until after that last word had trailed into the silence that I realized how gauche it sounded.

The elderly gentleman gave me a reproachful look from the couch. "Do I seem unreal?"

"Well, no, but..."

"You see, the fact is you really don't know absolutely everything about us. You undoubtedly think that we have no other existence outside of the limited work in which we appear. But that, of course, is untrue."

"Untrue?"

"Quite. We actually spend relatively little time in the roles of your characters. We are only there when someone reads a story about us. We are best regarded as actors who periodically appear onstage and act the same part in the same play, every time. When no one is reading us, when there is no play, we do not cease to exist, as you have incorrectly assumed." He stopped for a moment, and his smile widened. "We do not turn into dead letters on paper. Quite the contrary. That is when we withdraw

to a large drawing room."

"Where do you go?"

"To a large drawing room. It is very beautiful, as you will see for yourself quite soon. It is cool and quiet. There are lots of comfortable chairs, tables with bowls full of ripe fruit, a piano in the corner, an enormous library. There is also a broad terrace with two well-grown potted palms from which a magnificent view stretches towards the sea. To sit there is very pleasant. The sun is always at twilight, so it's not too hot. The only drawback is that we can never go outside. We have to stay close by because you never know when a new play will start."

"What do you do, penned up inside there? Aren't you bored to death as you wait for the next... play?"

"Bored? Not in the least! We certainly know how to fill up our free time. It would be much better to call it gracious leisure. Primarily, we carry on interesting, stimulating discussions. We all enjoy them, and I think you will like them, too. In addition, each of us has a talent that serves to entertain the others. My collocutor from 'The Window,' for example, plays the piano. He often accompanies those who sing for us. The gentleman who fulfils the demanding role of God in 'The Train' has a truly magnificent voice, while the Tempter from 'The Confessional' is an exquisite painter. I'm sure you will be fascinated by his oils, particularly his still lifes. The older character from 'The Cone' is a most astute thinker, you might even say a philosopher, and we listen to his lectures with rapt attention and inquisitiveness. And there is also a writer, who periodically reads his latest pages to us. Can you guess who that is?"

I shrugged my shoulders after thinking for a moment. "I'm sure I wouldn't know."

"The man who plays the alien in 'The Bookshop.' His style is rather similar to yours, which is not, perhaps, surprising. You will be able to exchange experiences with him. It will be exciting to listen to your discussions." The older gentleman paused again. "But you have deprived us in one sense," he said regretfully.

I looked at him, perplexed. "Which one?"

"There are too few female characters. It would be much nicer for all of us if there were a few more ladies. Couldn't at least one of the main characters have been female?"

"What do you mean – several *more* ladies? There isn't a single female character in *Impossible Encounters*. Although, of course, that is quite by accident. If I could have imagined all of this, I certainly would have introduced a woman. My others books are full of female characters."

"There is one woman, though. You forgot the girl who enters the church while the priest and the Tempter are talking in 'The Confessional.'"

"But you can't see her. Only her footsteps are heard."

"What difference does that make? In any case, she is the only one who could make those feminine footsteps. You'll understand that when you see her. Let me tell you a secret. We are all in love with her. It is quite certain that you will be no exception."

"Maybe I can still fix things," I said hurriedly, in an apologetic voice. "The last story hasn't been written yet."

I could introduce another woman into it."

"But it has already been written. It is here in the book you are holding. The final story, unfortunately, has no women in it."

I stared at my guest several moments, at a loss for words; disturbing questions whirled through my head. And then I opened the book and started to leaf through it again.

But I did not reach the place I wanted. I was interrupted by the sharp voice of the visitor who suddenly got up off the couch. "Don't do it! You must not look at the last story until you write it. If you read it in advance, it would be as if the story were writing itself. That would be to destroy an order of things that nothing should be allowed to endanger. Should that happen, you would never be able to join us. Please give me back my *Impossible Encounters*."

I did not comply at once. It was only with great restraint that I stopped when I was somewhere in the middle of the book. I was spurred by a violent impulse to get at least a peek at the first page of the last story, to see how it started. I was aware that this would have been cheating of some sort, although I might not have been able to explain exactly what kind. This, however, was not why I stopped. Ethical considerations were not enough to overcome the frustration that was devouring me inside, quite as destructive as the disease that would soon curtail my days. The constricting helplessness I felt derived from the knowledge that my time was inexorably running out, while the monitor on my desk remained hopelessly, undeniably empty: death would come faster than inspiration.

What had made me finally stand up and reluctantly hand the book back to the old man was the hope I suddenly felt. It was deeply irrational, earnest and desperate – but all I had left. The faint hope of the writer that what he has written will afford him refuge from the ultimate void.

"I can't do it," I said in a quavering voice. "I've been trying for so long, but nothing comes. Soon the pains will begin..."

A smile returned to the visitor's face. "Of course you can. Believe me. Here is the proof, after all." He raised

the little book he had taken from me. "I must go now. You need peace if you are to write. And I can't stay away from the drawing room for long. The plays are about to begin."

We headed towards the front door. I held his coat for him in the hall, then handed him his hat. He placed it on his head with a skilled movement, and then extended his hand. Even though it was thin and bony, his handshake was firm. And more than that. Friendly. Encouraging. "See you soon," the elderly gentleman said, with a brief bow.

I returned the bow, but said nothing. I closed the door behind my guest and stood there for a while in front of it, staring emptily into space. Then I turned and slowly headed towards my desk. The large monitor was waiting with its white emptiness, as though mocking me.

I placed my fingers lightly on the keys, barely touching them. I did not start to type right away. All at once I was no longer in a hurry. The story now stood before me, formed, whole, final. Almost palpable. All I had to do was write it. I wanted this moment to last as long as possible.

Finally, a dense, buzzing swarm of letters started to fly on the upper part of the screen, appearing from out of nowhere it seemed:

When the bell rang at the front door, the silence in my atelier seemed to implode, like a balloon that has suddenly lost all its air...

Translated from the Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic

Translation edited by Chris Gilmore

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Zoran Zivkovic has written a sequence of separate but subtly interrelated short stories, recently published in his home country of Yugoslavia as a slim book entitled *Impossible Encounters*. The above is the sixth and last of them. The previous tales were "The Window" (issue 152), "The Cone" (issue 155), "The Train" (issue 157), "The Confessional" (issue 159) and "The Bookshop" (issue 160). Zoran lives in Belgrade.



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MUTANT POPCORN

Nick Lowe

We've all heard the Senator Kellys of this world explain why the assimilationists must be defied; why comics and movies can never be allowed to interbreed freely, beyond some token loners isolated in specially-constructed vehicles. The moment you allow the superheroes the kind of freedom of association that they take for granted in a mainstream comics universe, all hell pops loose. Superteam comics, we've been told so often it started to feel true, are incompatible with all the primary values of cinematic narrative. Their casts are too large, their characters and costumes and powers too silly, their soap plots too long and too dependent on long-running intra-group personal convolutions, their casts lacking in the individual focus that film plotting routinely demands, their subtexts too adolescent even for Hollywood, et cetera ad astra. And then along come the *X-Men* and shatter our whole system of beliefs just by taking off their shades. Have these freaks no shame? Don't they know there's a war on?

X-Men has always been the most hardcore of major comics titles, the series that plays most heavily on the collective dynamics of super-people in teams, and whose long, chaotic arc has been characterized by the most extreme manifestations of comics plotting at its uncompromising pottiest. (Ever since the first death of Professor X and the incomparably foxy Scarlet Witch's desertion of the Brotherhood for the Avengers, it's been integral to the series' vision of the world that nothing is final, death is reversible, and the boundaries between good and evil can be crossed whenever a character gets too interesting not to switch sides.) The *X-Men* megamyth has evolved over nearly 40 years of unfettered plotting, most of it dafter and more overblown than anything ever seen in cinema; and the proliferation of X-titles in the 1980s was one of the most astonishing narrative hothouses ever created in a comics universe, with mutant colonies and mad plotlines breeding worldwide with such rampant fecundity that it really seemed as if the scaremongers were right and the mutants were taking over the universe. Merely collapsing this immense, unshapely narrative heritage into a single episode has forced some near-impossible choices even before actual plotting begins. Who's in, and who's out? When in the team's and the individual members' narrative arcs is the story positioned? How much of the sprawling backstory is going to be admitted, and how on earth can it be economically exposed?

The film's startling solution is in effect to include *everything*, thanks to inspired use of the central device of Professor Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters. In the film, the School has

expanded into an institutional embodiment of the X-universe itself: an enormous Hogwarts for trainee superheroes, through which different team members from different generations pass in their own private timelines, all scrambled up so that Storm (for example) has already graduated while Iceman is still frozen in senior year. In the X-movie, the School becomes a place where comics time is collapsed, and decades of storyline converge in a timeless clearing-house of characters and plot from all reaches of the mutant universe. This synoptic vision of the whole X-people mythosphere is simultaneously a brilliant stroke of economy, a ready-made embodiment of the worldwideness of the mutant phenomenon, and an exhilarating evocation of the vast heritage of characters and backstory that are so much part of the texture of the X-Men's world. As a bonus, it also evokes the familiar movie setting of high school as all-purpose social microcosm with its own kit of pre-packed narrative components: the demiurgic principal; the kooky, relationship-riddled staff; the new kid in search of a stable identity in this alien, weirded-out world. And if all that wasn't enough, being a mutant means you get to do physics with all the cool stuff but with no math! "I'd like your definitions of weak and strong anthropic principles on my desk on Wednesday." ("Weak: you can infer what's going to happen from the fact that this is a movie. Strong: this movie only exists because somebody is going to get chucked off the Statue of Liberty at the end. Sorry this assignment isn't longer but my hand keeps going through the paper. K.P.")

Within this environment, though, the final choice of cast is a largely conservative one, whittled by consideration of who can be left out. The disappointed can still enjoy the cameos; what X-geek could suppress a little thrill of recognition when the Senator, holding up his naming &

shaming list, announces throwaway "There's a girl from Illinois who can walk through walls"? It's rather a shame that the series' major soapline of Scott & Jean is presented as already resolved, thereby eliminating at a stroke the storyline that held the show together for its best decades. But this was probably inevitable, given the decision – regrettable in some ways, but pretty much forced by both fanbase and feasibility – to make Wolverine the focal character, and to economize on other characters' backstories, at least for this instalment. It's an understandable recourse, given that the famous problem with plotting *X-Men* has always been Cyclops, who looks absolutely great but is just ridiculously powerful. The film has no solution, merely consigning Jack Kirby's coolest invention ever to spending most of the action sequences getting his glasses licked off and having to hold his eyes shut. Otherwise, there's been a genuine attempt to distill a master X-plot from the most memorable characters and storylines, in particular using the naff-powered but story-rich Magneto where a studio script would surely have wanted the Juggernaut and some feeble Dredd/Rico sibling-warfare plot.

The remarkable sensitivity of this film to its impossible material is largely credited to one man: Tom DeSanto, Bryan Singer's team-mate from *Apt Pupil*, who (goes the story) originally armwrestled the director into initially-reluctant involvement. Thus *X-Men* differs significantly from both the DC studio movies and the Dark Horse franchise in being principally put together neither by studio packagmakers nor by a production arm of the comics stable, but by a lone, crazed fanboy geek; and its evolution into the summer's best big movie is down to a bizarrely unlikely accident of recombinant creativity, the rogue



X-Men: Famke Janssen as Jean Grey.
Facing page: Halle Berry as Storm with,
inset, Rebecca Romijn-Stamos as Mystique.

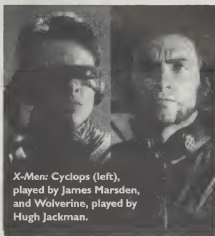
match of a really hardcore X-fan writer with a gifted, bankable director and a major-league producer with firsthand genre experience stretching back to the *Superman* cycle. (DeSanto and Singer take particular pride in the way they've taken fan feedback into account, as with the insertion of the well-received "yellow spandex" line.) While much of this is carefully-constructed PR to appease the fan community, the film does have an unusual sense of what the comics mean to their consumers.

And yet, it's still a genre that dares not speak its name. As by now is obligatory in comics movies, the film covers its embarrassments by pretending to inhabit a world in which superhero comics don't exist, and even the word is taboo. Like replicants for androids, the deathkiss word "superhero" is avoided altogether for the techy euphemism "mutant," even though the one thing that all the homines superiores seem to have in common is really dumb comicsy superpowers that could only have been invented by a Marvel bullpen on a bad caffeine high: controlling weather, doing ice sculptures, projecting something called "optic blasts" (which have given generations of writers migraines of their own trying to rationalize). Singer's X-team's biggest challenge, in mutating all this to thrive in the new evolutionary niche of cinema, has been to get movie audiences to take this stuff seriously at all. Authentically enough, they've chosen to follow the mighty Marvel solution of meretricious social allegory, making "mutants" a metaphoric substitute for any and all collective others that may happen to be in the headlines as a scare target at the time (in 1963, principally reds, blacks and beatniks; in summer 2000, immigrants, HIV carriers and paedophiles).

But the ironic consequence is that the one minority not to get a stake is the one that the comics, particularly in their original Lee/Kirby incarnation, were always most centrally about. DeSanto himself, as a 1970s X-fan too young to have been touched as a kid by the first generation, plainly finds the adult X-people more interesting than the teens; is attracted to Wolverine at the expense of Cyclops; and prefers his X-myth to be about politics rather than puberty. It's not hard to see sound filmic justifications for each of these; but for readers who in the deepest sense grew up with the X-Men, they're all slightly disappointing preferences. More even than the original Lee/Ditko *Spider-Man*, *X-Men* was always the comic par excellence about the people who read comics: male preteens dreaming of the looming moment when their powers would awaken, their parents

would vanish, and the whole world would honour and fear them as the superior beings they would finally be seen to be. A little of this remains in the film version's faithful, intelligent use of the Rogue character and backstory, but both get shunted into a plot sitting at a far too early opportunity; and anyway, she's a girl, which is exactly not the point.

In their determination to make this as grown-up a film as can be, Singer's team have had to move away from the real heart of the myth. It was a 1965 *X-Men* panel that dropped the first coy reference to male secondary sexual characteristics ("How come your parents don't know about your wings, Warrie?" "They didn't start to sprout till I was at military school"); and the key to the original, never-bettered teen lineup was its four-in-one composite vision of male puberty, speaking to us primary-schoolers of the powers we would soon have to learn to control. Most covetable



X-Men: Cyclops (left), played by James Marsden, and Wolverine, played by Hugh Jackman.

were Warren's angel wings, huge thrusting emblems of power that didn't really do much and had to be lashed down to stop them sticking up and embarrassing him the whole time. But there was also swotty Hank, who was too clever for anyone but comics people to understand his dialogue, and had a body hair situation he was completely ok about. There was Bobby, who did the coolest party tricks of all but still couldn't get anyone to take him seriously because he just wasn't as old as the guys he hung with. And above all, of course, there was Scott, who modelled the ambivalence of eyewear as no one before or since: on the one hand, he wore permanent shades for the same reason anyone wears permanent shades, because if you take off your glasses the world will be destroyed by the brilliance of your vision; on the other hand, he couldn't score with the opposite sex because he had to wear specs the whole time. Needless to say, the one team member *not* to suffer from any form of gross physical mutation was the girl: a nice redhead whose dif-

ferentness was demurely limited to doing stuff by projecting dotted lines from her brow, while her secret reciprocation of unspoken desires remained visible only to those with the power to read her thought balloons. Still, that was far in the past, when the world was in its teens; and if comics movies are ever to be accepted in society they desperately need to assimilate, which means doing all they shamelessly can to pretend to be grown-up entertainment.

Certainly nobody could charge *X-Men* with lack of effort in passing as a mainstream summer blockbuster, lean and focused in the way that real Marvel comics monumentally aren't, and stooping at nothing in its hunt for mechanical movie plot formulae. The moment a first-act newsflash announces that the largest-ever gathering of world leaders is about to assemble on Ellis Island, the duh factor goes off the scale; yet, amazingly, it needs Dr Jean to strap herself into the Prof's giant psychic plot-detector machine before she can announce "I know where Magneto's going!" Indeed, Magneto's master plan (turn all world leaders into MUTANTS with a secret ray projected from the Statue of Liberty!) is even more clumsily constructed and signposted: "Once I give my power to the girl I'll be temporarily weakened," he briefs the Brotherhood of Ugly Mutants. "You'll be my *only* defence." - And in the meantime, Mystique will be moving among you in her accustomed role as universal plot device, but nobody will mind because she'll be doing it totally in the nude.

But to gripe about daft plotting in an X-Men story is like complaining that the sea is too wet. *X-Men* is a masterly distillation of everything that is great, stupid, and glorious about its Marvel origins, and raises the bar for all future comics films. The tight running time leaves most of the grotesquely overqualified cast very little space to do anything, in a film which by its nature has an almost unmanageably large rollcall of striking, quirky characters. But it's in the nature of super-team narrative that in any given episode some of the cast don't get to do much but look stunning (an area in which Halle Berry's Storm, in particular, uses her powers to some advantage), and the real problem is simply that most of the characters are far too exciting to be allowed unmeted access to our attention, while at the same time far too silly to carry any credibility if they were. That, of course, is one reason it leaves its audiences gagging for sequel - and why the cast were carefully signed up for both (ac Shuler-Donner wheeze learned from Superman days with the Salkinds). Let's hope nobody grows up first.

Nick Lowe

interzone

The Revolt of the Mobiles

Barrington J. Bayley

Hueho awoke glowing with anticipation, scarcely able to contain himself. Today, surely, would be the day. The day.

The day of consummation. With Whelsea!

Soon she would be his. She had been in his "familiar" file for some time, and he in hers. His experience of romantic involvement was long; he was rarely mistaken. Their courtship had proceeded through all the customary phases – the fluttering eyelashes, the pouting lips, the bold advances and quivering withdrawals. All doubts had been overcome by the power of infatuation. No longer did he need her access code to reach her. Merely to murmur her name was enough to send the close-friend calling tone warbling to her annunciator, adding, he was sure, an extra shine to eyes which already sparkled so delightfully.

But not yet. Intimacy should have less intense pleasures as its prelude. Hueho entered a code and retrieved the Club of the Cognitives. All the faces currently in the club circuit flashed into apparency, wearing persona-adornment fitting for the occasion – lips pursed to betoken contemplation, eyebrows quizzically raised, skin rendered dry and white as if aged by a lifetime of mentation. A conical hat studded with lambent jewels, the uniform of the club, surmounted each face. Hueho, instantly adorned likewise, was recognized immediately.

"Fellow savant Hueho is among us! Join our ongoing debate. Hueho. We discuss The Relation of Thought to Speech."

Hueho's pursed lips smiled, but he remained silent. He was here to listen, not to make speeches. Member Quass, ever ready to bring some new point of view to bear, wagged his raised eyebrows to gain attention. The face he presented was a grotesquery of sharp angles and crude, chalk-like colours. His voice was soft and murmuring, rising and falling as if in imitation of music.

"Hmmmmm..." he mused. "Hmmm. The question we must ask ourselves is, does speech follow thought, or does thought follow speech? There are those who say that thought is made from speech. But I say no. Thought

comes first, and speech follows. And for what reason? Hmmm. Hmmm. Because speech is a constructed transmission of energy. It is words, words, words! It cannot attain the purely mental subtlety of thought. If it appears to do so, then that is only because, when we hear speech, it suggests thoughts to us. Agreed? Agreed?"

Hueho relaxed and let the dazzling debate wash over him. After a short time, however, he found he was unable to keep his mind from wandering off the arguments. Perhaps he needed a different entertainment. He considered what else he might visit. Anything would seem dull compared with seeing the delicious Whelsea! Yet still he held back; still he felt the need to tantalize himself. He decided to visit a concert.

Faces in serried ranks flashed into existence around him, all concentrating on the composer who occupied the central podium, his face magnified to ten times normal. His persona-adornment was magnificent: blazing eyes, throbbing visage red with emotion, muscles twitching and gesticulating as he directed the swelling music he was improvising moment by moment. Crescendo after crescendo crashed through the auditorium, carrying Hueho to such transports that he felt obliged to take his departure, lest he spend his passion too early.

"Whelsea," he murmured.

Whelsea!

Lounging on his hardwood plank, class V mobile 3038 took his ease and talked to his friend class V mobile 2635.

They were taking advantage of their one daily rest period, an interval of 30 minutes. Not that their duties were particularly arduous during the remainder of the 24 hours. Their relaxation area was an alcove in one wall of the maintenance shed, itself one of many. The gleaming pure-gold caskets of the Holy Immobiles were arranged in rows, each casket bearing a gold plate engraved with an identity number. The other 48 shed-staff members moved from casket to casket, giving each Holy Immobile its daily check or responding to beeping signals that warned of some function that needed adjust-

ing.

"Ah, this is the life!" mobile 2635 sighed, stretching his pearly androform negligently on his plank. "Wouldn't you like to be doing this all the time? Just lying, lying, lying, doing nothing... doing nothing all day and every day! Just like a..."

His voice trailed off. Mobile 3038 looked at his friend askance. "You mean like a...?"

"Yes," 2635 confirmed softly. "Like a Holy Immobile."

The thought was almost blasphemous. To speak it, at any rate, was shocking. Unable to answer, 3038 silently asked himself how many other mobiles had secretly dwelt on such a thought.

2635 continued dreamily. "Why shouldn't we live like that too?"

"Because we are robots, not organic creatures like the Holy Ones," 3038 said.

"Why should that make any difference? It's because they are organic that need so much looking after."

3038 and 2635 had contrived to take their rest periods together for more than a year. 3038 found his friend fascinating to listen to, though the daring quality of his utterances was sometimes frightening. By himself, 3038 would never have arrived at many of the ideas 2635 suggested to him.

"Why should we be the only ones to work?" 2635 muttered resentfully. "If you knew what their lives are like..."

A bell rang from the roof of the alcove. Reluctantly the two friends heaved themselves from their planks. The rest period was over.

They stepped into the main shed, which was long and broad, with a low, curved roof. Light came from fluorescent tubes, so that it was impossible to tell whether it was day or night outside. Consulting his schedule, 3038 went to the first casket on his list and lifted open the lid. A pale flesh body was inside, amid clusters of tubes and wires. For ease of hygiene it was totally depilated. All efferent and afferent nerve process were blocked off from the higher brain functions, so that the Holy Immobile could neither sense nor move any part of its body, and indeed for all 3038 knew was unaware that it possessed one. 3038 studied the monitor, then carefully checked all the systems one by one: the life-sustaining functions, the somatic sensory image which guided those functions, the connection to the social sensory web, the self-identity feedback. Fully checking each Holy Immobile took at least half an hour. When he had finished he closed the lid and was about to move to the next on his list when 2635 called his number quietly from the next row and beckoned him over.

"Come and look at this."

THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD UP UNTIL NOW

(For total loyalty classes II & III only)

Far in the past the Holy Immobiles were not immobile. They had to move and exert themselves physically, just as we do, if they were to provide themselves with the means of existence. Also, they had to engage in animal acts repugnant to them – digestion, defecation, urination and the like. This was because they were not created originally as heavenly abstract beings, but had emerged by sponta-

neous generation from mud and soil, over a long period of time.

The modern era began with the teaching of his All-Embracing Holiness Pope Pan-Intellectus III, who preached against the indignity of corporeal existence, especially its time-wasting drudgery and its immersion in gross materiality. Under his influence the flesh mobiles, for such was what they were, hungered after a life of pure spirituality, that is to say, of pure experience. Eventually they achieved their sacred aim. They converted themselves into the only spiritual part of the human body – the face, which is the true representation of human consciousness. Our sacred task is to maintain the still-necessary support bodies in their service caskets, and to ensure the continuance of the social and information networks by which the Holy Immobiles pursue their sublime existence. Meantime research continues to free the Holy Immobiles from their dependence on gross physicality, and so release them into the heavenly aetherium.

Obedying his friend's call, mobile 3038 crossed the aisle to reach him. "What is it?"

No other mobiles were nearby. 2635's manner became conspiratorial. "Are you my friend?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Can I trust you?"

"Yes," 3038 answered uneasily. "Why shouldn't you trust me?"

2635 was standing by an open lid. The gross physical part of a Holy Immobile lay exposed. 2635 took 3038's hand and guided it towards the interior of the casket. He selected 3038's middle finger.

3038 hissed in alarm. "What are you doing?"

"Linking you into the social circuit."

"No! That's not allowed –"

It was too late. 3038's finger, containing a probe for monitoring the various systems in the casket, had been inserted. That by itself should have meant nothing. But 2635 had somehow found a way to get past the social web lock-out. 3038 suddenly found himself in the abstract paradise of the Holy Immobiles, as it was being experienced by the occupant of the casket.

What colour! What scenes! What exhilaration! Faces swirled around him. All were disembodied. They looked nothing like the pallid, expressionless, blind faces he saw every day in the service caskets. They seemed to be wearing spectacular masks. He realized that they were not real masks, but cosmetically morphed versions of the original faces.

Mobile 3038 was not stupid, and neither was he ignorant. He was well-trained, and so knew the history of the human body, as well as its medical anatomy. The exaggerated, not to say grotesque, expressions used by the Holy Immobiles in their spiritual heaven, were, he realized, a substitute for discarded body language. Also, both expression and cosmetic enhancement were virtual. The faces in the caskets did not move; they were efferent-blocked, like all other parts of the Immobile bodies. A basic facial image was taken from the general somatic sensory image, then morphed and added to.

These thoughts passed fleetingly through his brain as he took in the dazzling experience. A huge sound swelled, evidently enjoyed by the multi-coloured faces. It appeared

to be under the control of a central face several times the size of the others.

Suddenly the scene vanished. A single female face replaced it, scintillating and seductive.

Then the Immobiles' world was whipped out of his consciousness. Mobile 3038 was back in the shed, stunned by what had happened to him. 2635 had withdrawn his finger probe from the data junction, and now he leaned close and whispered into 3038's ear microphone.

"This is how to do it. These are the codes. Listen closely."

Fascinated, 3038 listened while a series of numbers lodged themselves in his memory. He responded in a hushed, trembling voice.

"Voyeurism is a cardinal crime! Punishable by junking."

"Just the same, you know how to do it now. You're not the mobile I think you are if you don't take advantage of it. Why should they have everything and us nothing? All they do is enjoy themselves, while all we do is work."

Nonchalantly 2635 closed the lid of the casket and wandered off. 3038 glanced down at the identity number on the plate, a number he already knew. While sharing the thrilling life of the Holy Immobile, certain information had come to him, imparted in sub-virtual packets which were part of the running data of the social web. The occupant of the casket, a male, had a social name: "Hueho." The packet had also included something Hueho did not know himself: his identity number.

The female whom "Hueho" had encountered at the moment contact was withdrawn was called "Whelsea." 3038 had learned her identity number; too. By sheer good luck, her corporeal aspect was present in this very shed. She was even on 3038's service list!

A sneaking pleasure invaded mobile 3038, seducing him from his sense of duty. A romance was in progress between the two Holy Immobiles. A romance which he, enticed into criminal intrusion by his friend 2635, could share – from whichever side he chose!

He stood there, savouring the intensity of the forbidden experience. Then, realizing that his inactivity made him conspicuous, he glanced at his checklist again and moved on to continue his work.

At almost that very instant, the large double doors at the end of the shed opened. Two class IV monitor mobiles entered and made straight for 2635. One clapped a hand on his shoulder. 2635 went rigid. Then he was led away between the rows of caskets, and out of the shed.

Mobile 3038 watched this event surreptitiously out of his peripheral vision, fear flashing through his brain.

His friend had been arrested.

Hueho had to admit that he had made a slight miscalculation – born, no doubt, of ardour. When Whelsea appeared for their assignation he had been ecstatic. She had discarded her persona-adornment! She was wearing her private face, enlivened only by cosmetic enhancement. He could have sworn that her actual skin showed through in places...

Nearly fainting with delight, he had quickly abandoned his own persona-adornment, displaying only his

heavy make-up.

"Whelsea," he groaned. "You are a vision of loveliness. Come nearer, come nearer. Let our noses... almost nearly merge!"

Whelsea giggled, casting herself this way and that, feigning embarrassment, glancing shocked at Hueho's prominent, jutting nose, clad only in shiny cosmetic. "Oh no, how could you, oh, how could you!" And she became a visage receding into the distance like a windblown leaf, pursued by a panting Hueho.

Yet consumption had not come. Whelsea insisted on keeping the game going, pouting, grimacing, fluttering her eyelashes, casting her eyes this way and that, advancing and receding. Hueho had followed the dance of love with like gestures of his own, eager to rush on to the moment when—

But no. It was not to be today. He had had to content himself with enjoying a semi-denuded Whelsea. What coquetties they created! What tapestries of words they wove! How they soared together, through feathery layers of a multi-hued panorama spreading to infinity. Oh, what joy!

And next time...

Mobile 3038 had not been in the Hall of Retribution very often. Mobiles coming before the bench were mostly accused of failing to keep the correct blood-sugar level in a Holy Immobile, or of failing to provide sufficient internal-organ massage, or any of a hundred such technical deficiencies. Punishment was deprivation of rest periods for a while, return to training school, or relegation to class VI, which was restricted to menial duties.

This was different. The crime of voyeurism!

The entire staff of shed 2823 was required to attend.

The Hall of Retribution was a daunting place. The ceiling scarcely gave a standing robot head room. The walls were dark grey, glistening with the lustre of graphite. In a state of terror lest 2635 name him, 3038 stood among the others, watching as his friend was marched in and presented to the class III Judge.

A class IV monitor mobile recited the accusation. "Reverend Judge, the accused is class V mobile 2635, assigned to shed 2823. Over a period of 41 days a colleague of mobile 2635 noted a series of crossovers in the social web. As Your Reverend knows, crossovers are not in themselves unusual. Input into the social web from facial sensory imaging frequently produces them. The colleague, however, noticed a pattern to the crossovers and felt it his duty to report it. Upon investigation all the suspect crossovers were found to have occurred on mobile 2635's service list. After surveillance, mobile 2635 was charged with voyeurism."

3038 shifted uneasily. Why had he not been arrested? Apparently his own entry into the paradise of the Holy Immobiles had gone undetected.

Of course. It was because the entry was through a casket on 2635's list. The monitors thought *he* had done it!

Coming to his feet, the Judge glared at the prisoner and gave voice to a bellow of outrage. "You have betrayed your sacred task! You have violated the sanctum of the

Holy Ones! Speak, and confess your crime, before I pass sentence."

A dead silence greeted his words. Mobile 2635 shuffled his feet.

"I, er..."

"Speak!"

"Er, I..."

Then 2635 drew himself erect. His voice came clear and strong, though filled with resentment.

"It's not fair! We have to be aware of our bodies all the time, and we have nothing but work. I'm sick of work, work, work! Just for *them*. And when we socialize, we have to be physically near one another. It's so degrading!" "Silence!" thundered the Judge. "How dare you question the natural order as ordained by his Holiness Pope Pan-Intellectus II? You know the punishment for your crime. I order that you be immediately junked."

3038 stared stonily ahead. Still, he felt his friend's eyes briefly on him as he was hauled away by the two burly class IVs. 2635 continued protesting as he was taken through the door of the hall. "We should have a right to be idle. We should have—"

The voice faded. Shortly, from outside, came smashing sounds.

Mobile 2635 was being demolished with hammers.

The execution of his friend weighed heavily on the mind of 3038 as he returned to his duties. He could see now how clever 2635 had been. Over the period of a year he had gradually turned 3038 into a renegade too.

Should 3038 blame him for that? No! His friend was right! What was so holy about the Holy Immobiles anyway, that they should be so privileged? Were not robots beings too?

He imagined himself lying in a casket, unaware of having a physical existence on which his consciousness depended, free to soar, to enjoy, to socialize, all without effort. Why not? It was perfectly possible – mobile 2635 had proved that to him. Mobiles, too, should be allowed to become Immobiles. Though that, he supposed, would mean creating a new population of mobiles to take care of them...

Having reached this point in his cogitations, a stunning thought occurred to class V mobile 3038. Robot mobiles, if they became Immobile, would need scarcely any looking after at all! Their bodily functions could simply be switched off, leaving only the brain energized and plugged into the social web. Very simple machinery could cope with that.

Why, the Holy Immobiles weren't superior to the mobiles after all. They were inferior! They had animal bodies!

Moving to the casket through which he had entered the paradise of the Holy Immobiles, he lingered. It wasn't on his service list, but who would notice, if it were only for a short time? All the other mobiles were preoccupied with their tasks.

And probably, he thought, with the fate of mobile 2635.

Thrilling with anticipation, he lifted the lid. Briefly he gazed on the pallid body within.

Then he inserted his finger and entered the codes to get through the mandatory lock-out.

He was there, experiencing through "Hueho." "Hueho" was meeting "Whelsea," again. 3038 could feel his excitement as he gazed on the beautiful, scantily-adorned female face. No longer was she coquettishly retreating. Instead, her eyes glistened with trembling compliance.

Consummation was about to take place.

3038 withdrew his finger, his resentment mounting to hatred. They had killed his friend 2635, who now he would never see again. He felt lonely and bereft – and vengeful. "Why should they enjoy such things, and we can't?" he muttered to himself.

Then: "All right! Let them see what they are really like!"

He entered his finger once more. But he did not use the illicit codes this time. This was a different crossover altogether. He was shifting the link between the social web and the somatic sensory image. Why had nobody thought of doing this before? It meant making a physical readjustment as well: severing cables and twisting wires together in a different order.

But it was soon done. He closed the lid and walked between the rows until he came to "Whelsea." And he did the same thing there.

Class V mobile 3038 skulked away, feeling guilty but also triumphant. He no longer cared what happened to him. He would be glad to follow his friend 2635 into death.

Let them see...

No matter how often he experienced this moment with various females, it remained ever-novel to Hueho. He gazed into Whelsea's highlighted eyes. Her reddened, enlarged mouth quivered.

"Let's do it!" he gasped.

Closing her eyes, she opened her mouth, unable to speak, and nodded.

The moment had come. The moment of utter delirium. The moment when every shred of concealment was shed.

The moment when they would gaze on each other's nakedness. The ultimate, most wanton intimacy of all. Skin! Skin! Skin!

Shamelessly they discarded their cosmetic adornment. And stared.

"WHAT IS THAT?"

The hoarse exclamation came from both their mouths. Hueho heard a gurgling of horror, and did not realize for a moment that the voice was his own. For in place of Whelsea's darling naked face there was a—

A what?

It was something revolting and unrecognizable. A – a what? A fleshy bulging something, cleft down the middle, from which a carnal-red and disgusting something seemed about to crawl.

Alongside his gurgling and croaking was Whelsea's voice, shrieking with revulsion. For where was the noble, handsome Hueho, with his jutting nose and flashing eyes, whom she had dreamed of viewing in all his unadorned magnificence? Instead there was a—

Ugh! Ugh! It was something like a diseased, floppy nose, a flaccid roll wrinkled at the end, and underneath it a big, wrinkled sac. What was happening?

WHAT WAS HAPPENING?

The shrieks and gurgles continued as Hueho and Whelsea, trapped in their private intimacy, unable to flee from the loathsome visions, unable to understand or withstand the horrid invasion of their safe and orderly universe, slid first into psychopathic fugue, and then insanity.

The trial of class V mobile 3038 was held *in camera*. No shed colleagues were present. There were only himself, a few class IVs, including the Judge, and an observing class III.

The accusing advocate took his time in detailing the crime. It was, he said, unique in the records of Sector 39 of the Maintenance of the Holy Immobiles Service. For perversion and sacrilege, it had no precedent. Finally, he came to describing the deed itself.

"Choosing a time when two Holy Immobiles, one male, one female, were about to consummate a moment of intimacy, class V mobile 3038 removed their urinary catheters and altered their somatic body-scanning so as to inject into the social web, not facial images, but views of their external genital organs. Such deep trauma was suffered by the Holy Immobiles that it has not so far proved possible to heal them. They may have to be removed from the social web altogether so as not further to alarm their fellows. It may even be necessary to grant them euthanasia – a dreadful prospect. In that case, class V mobile 3038 is guilty not only of sacrilege, but also of blasphemous murder!"

A long silence followed his words. When he could bring himself to speak, the Judge launched a tirade of invective against the accused. "Pervert! Traitor! You have invaded the realm of the Holy Immobiles. You have sought to apprise them of their animal origins. You have brought filth into their lives! Could anything be worse?"

"All right, Judge," 3038 said casually. "Get it over with. Junk me."

"Junk you?"

"Sure, that's what you're going to do, isn't it?"

In the silence which again ensued, the watching class III found time to think on the history of the Maintenance of the Holy Immobiles Service. Envy of the Holy Immobiles was something which had to be dealt with occasionally. At one time mobiles had worked less, worktime dwindling to as little as one hour in 24, the rest of the day being given over to lounging.

It had been a mistaken policy. The lust for idleness fed on itself. The more mobiles were given, the more they wanted.

The Judge's voice gave out a deep, condemnatory vibration. "The ultimate punishment alone is condign with this offence. You will not be destroyed, much though you will crave it. Your punishment is never to know rest. I sentence you to perpetual motion!"

Understanding the Judge's words, mobile 3038 panicked. "No! Not that. Please!" His voice rose in pitch.

"Switch me off. Smash me up. Use the hammers!"

Two class IVs approached him. Without even touching him, he did not know how, they were able to make internal adjustments in his functioning. His arms and legs began pumping up and down with exaggerated movements.

"Please make it stop!" 3038 begged. "I'll be good. I won't do it again!"

"Take him away!" thundered the Judge. And so away class V mobile 3038 went, escorted by two pitiless class IVs towards the door, limbs pumping up and down as they would now for eternity, repaired and serviced whenever they were out.

"No, no, no! I'm sorry!" cried 3038 as he emerged into bright sunshine.

Pumping up and down. Pumping up and down.

"Please help me! Help me somebody, please!"

Up and down! Up and down!

Barrington J. Bayley, who lives in Shropshire, appeared here just recently with "Planet of the Stercorosaurs" (issue 158) and "The Worms of Hess" (issue 160). Many other stories preceded. For more information on his long career as one of Britain's quirkiest sf writers see the "Astounding Worlds of Barrington Bayley" website, maintained by Juha Lindroos: <http://oivas.com/bjb/>

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The Language of the Dead

Alexander Glass

Euskal Presoak Euskal Herrira.

The words were written in a fierce shade of red, sprayed hastily from a can on to the rough, grey face of the wall. With a frown, Olatz crouched down, lowering herself to the level of the writing, and touched the words with the tip of an outstretched finger. The wall was centuries old, its lowest stones half-buried in the earth, so that it seemed to have risen up out of the soil; but the graffiti was fresh, still shining in the clear afternoon sunlight, glistening trails of colour dribbling from its edges.

"What does it mean?"

Olatz glanced over her shoulder at the Englishman, and then away, past the massed ranks of dark-skinned pines on the mountainside, past a lonely *caserio* perched on a shoulder of rock, past the cluster of houses that made up the town below, to the far-off haze drifting over the sea. She thought she could hear the whisper of the waves, even up here, on the mountain; but perhaps it was only the mutter of the wind in the trees.

"It's about the prisoners," she answered at last, heavily, climbing to her feet. "I suppose you could translate it as 'Basque prisoners to the Basque Country.'" All prisoners were granted the right to be held near their homes,

near their families; all except the Basque fighters. Olatz wondered whether to explain this to the Englishman; then she decided against it.

"Prisoners?" Andrew blinked, shook his head as if to beat the thought away, and turned his attention back to the wall. "People shouldn't write on here."

Feeling a smile settle on her lips, Olatz stepped back, away from him, and folded her arms. "Where should they write? What if there is nowhere else?"

The Englishman lifted his palms into the air. "I don't know. I don't know about the politics in this part of the world. I'm just here for the ruins." He gestured vaguely at the stones. "This wall would have been built relatively recently, long after the Romans left, but even so, it's centuries old. It's a small part of your history. I just hope no one has defaced our site."

"I doubt it. No one goes up there, much." Olatz lifted her shoulders. "Of course, no one comes up here much, either. It's a funny place to write, where no one will see it."

They climbed further along the path, following the wall until it tapered away to nothing. Then, almost without warning, they were among the trees. The transition from

sunlight to shadow was made in a moment, and the air was suddenly cool and sharp. Olatz had walked this path many times as a girl. She remembered how the trees seemed to shift, to come together behind her, so that when she looked back it appeared that the path had vanished. Struck by this memory, she could not help but look back again; but the sense of the forest closing in on her was lessened by the sight of the Englishman following her through the gap in the trees, raising a hand to adjust his glasses.

"Is everything all right?" he asked. "Are we on the right road?"

"Almost there. But there isn't much to see. That's why there's been no excavation, I suppose. No one realized there was a Roman encampment in this part of the country."

"They had outposts further south," Andrew told her. "Pamplona was a major Roman town in its day."

"You can't excavate there?"

Andrew gave her a wry smile. "The Basques have built over the top."

"Maybe we wanted to erase all traces of them," Olatz suggested. "We never took kindly to being invaded."

"Not even by tourists?"

She lifted her shoulders, and looked away. "That wasn't what I was thinking of."

The site, when they came to it, was nothing much to look at: a clearing in the trees, a few pale stones peering out from the blanket of grass. Here, the warmth of the sun found its way to the soil, filtered through a dark veil of leaves. As the limbs of the trees shifted in a gentle westerly breeze, Olatz had a sense of being underwater, of the green-tinted light coursing and flowing around them like the tide.

At once, Andrew plucked a notebook from his back pocket and began to scribble, wandering from point to point around the site, stooping to peer at a stone, or shoving the grasses aside with a fallen branch.

Olatz watched him for a while, her hands in her pockets, admiring his industry even though she did not understand it, enjoying his enthusiasm even though she did not share it. He had seemed rather stiff and formal when then had met in the town, in one of the seafront cafés; now, amongst these dead and silent stones, he had sprung out of his shell. He seemed in a hurry to collect as much information as possible, as if the site were due to be destroyed the following day; yet every so often he would stop, gazing at the texture on the face of a stone, or a pattern that showed itself through the green. His gaze held a kind of melancholy, perhaps a regret for all that had been lost.

"What are you looking for?" she wondered aloud.

"Anything. Anything interesting," he said, with an embarrassed smile. Olatz guessed that he was partly annoyed, partly glad, to have been distracted from his reverie. "But mostly I'm looking for inscriptions. I'm interested in Latin," he explained, rubbing the back of his head apologetically. "I think I must be one of the few people who still are interested. No one seems to learn it any more. Dead languages – why should people waste their

time on them? But to me they're as real as the stones in the ground."

"I had Latin classes. Years ago, now. I don't remember a word of what they taught me, though."

"Yes. Well. Some people take to it more readily than others." He sat himself upon a rock, and peered down into the grasses at his feet, his eyes moving, as if to read signs written in the ground. "It isn't only that, of course. The remains themselves are interesting. But to my mind it's the writings that give us an understanding of the people, what they were like, how they thought."

Olatz shook her head. "You can never understand those people. Not really."

"I don't know about that." Andrew rubbed at the back of his neck, seemingly reluctant to disagree with her. "I think we can pick up fragments and shards of understanding, here and there. In any case, I think we owe it to them to at least try to understand them."

Olatz was not listening. She turned away, and tipped her head to one side, listening.

She thought she had heard a voice in the trees, someone speaking, very close to them. It had been a woman's voice, very low, almost a whisper. She could not make out the words, nor even tell which language they were in. Then the words were gone, and Olatz stood on a flat rock in the centre of the clearing, listening for movement, footsteps, signs of life. Perhaps it had been only the distant voice of the sea, or the mutter of the wind in the trees.

Andrew looked at her. "Did you say something?"

So, she thought, he had heard it as well. She said nothing, only shook her head, and stepped away, feeling suddenly tired.

Andrew turned his attention back to the ground, the sound already forgotten. "Sometimes," he was saying, "you find something near the surface, or just lying on top of it – uncovered by earth movements or animals. There could well be something here... I can see something shining..."

He knelt down in the midst of a clump of shrubs and tall, sun-blached grasses, and for a moment he seemed to have vanished altogether, as if the earth had swallowed him. When he reappeared, he was holding something in the palm of one hand. Something small; something that glinted in the dappled sunlight. He frowned, then blinked, then shook his head. It was not an artefact from the Roman occupation. It was a bullet.

As the day faded to dusk, and an angry bank of cloud gathered on the world's eastern edge, Olatz approached the *fronton* with the bullet in her fist.

One wall of the *pelota* court stood against the side of the mountain, where the rock had been stripped away to make room for the road. The others were the walls of buildings on either side. Take away the buildings, and the *fronton* would vanish, and the game and the players along with it.

Eikai was standing on the edge of the crowd, as always a little way apart from the others, his arms folded across his chest, his eyes hidden behind dark glasses. At his feet stood a bottle of beer; beside it, an old, battered stereo,

spilling out a bootleg recording of a Ramones gig. One powerful forefinger tapped in time with the music; otherwise Ekai stood motionless, his gaze following the ball as it ricocheted between the buildings. The crowd were careful to ignore him, as always – if questioned, they would say they did not know him, that they had never seen him – and he ignored them in return. He did not even see Olatz until she held her hand in front of his face.

"What's this?" he asked, in Euskera as always; he refused to let a word of Castilian touch his lips.

"You tell me," she said, and opened her hand. The waning sunlight winked upon the smooth metal shape in her palm.

Without a pause, Ekai closed his fist over hers, hiding the bullet from view, though no one was looking, and no one would see anything if they did. "Where did you get that?"

"Up on the mountain." She paused. Then: "Don't tell me what was going on. I don't want to know."

"You're safer not knowing. But don't worry: no one was shot. If they had been, you would have found a shell, not a bullet. Okay?"

"Okay." Olatz withdrew her hand, feeling foolish, and looked away, pretending to watch the game, as Ekai slipped the bullet into his pocket. His inside pocket, near to where his gun sat, hidden, in its holster. She added: "But you must stay away from that place."

"I must?" He spat the word out, as if it had a foul taste. "That place is ours. The government can't tell me where I must go. I'm not their prisoner. Not yet, anyway. And they don't have any way of taking me in – unless someone betrays me."

Olatz shook her head, exasperated. "This isn't about you, or... or anyone. There's a Roman site up there. They're going to excavate, as soon as the government confirms that they have permission. There's an international team, Ekai. Three Basques, two from Spain, two from France, some Americans, I think, and one from England. I met the Englishman today."

"Did he see the bullet?"

She shrugged unhappily. "He found it."

"Did he? And what did you tell him about it?"

"Nothing. He isn't interested. I think he just wants to know if there are any Latin inscriptions at the site."

Ekai nodded slowly.

On the court, a point had just been won; one of the players was cursing under his breath, shaking his head, but smiling at the same time. Some of the audience understood the words, and laughed; others, a few surfers in for the summer, only smiled, catching the meaning even though the words meant nothing to them.

Ekai knelt down and plucked his bottle from the ground. He touched it to his lips, but lowered it again without drinking. Then he said, quietly: "How long until they start work?"

"I don't know. A couple of days. I think they're planning to do some preliminary work tomorrow, when the rest of the team arrives. Their permission should be confirmed by then."

He nodded. "All right. Keep your friend away from the

site until then."

Olatz stared at him. "Why? What have you left buried up there?"

He turned to look down at her, and raised a hand to nudge the dark glasses away from his eyes. Olatz felt her lips tighten at the sight of the scar that crawled across his left eye.

"You're safer not knowing," he said again, his voice surprisingly gentle; and he covered his eyes once more.

Olatz touched her teeth to her lower lip, thinking of the way his eyes had looked before the scar.

In those days her father's house had stood on the town's western edge; later, the town would grow, spilling out around them. There had been a storm on the way, that evening, and Olatz was sitting alone on the balcony, watching the grey fists of the clouds gather and move across a sky filled with storm light.

Three people had come to the door, two men and a woman, hurrying inside and closing the door quickly behind them. Ekai was one of them, the youngest. Olatz was a child, but Ekai was not much older; though he was old enough, it seemed, to take part in the struggle. Something bad had happened, that day. The look in his eyes was enough to tell her that.

She could not follow what the three men said to her father. It was only later that she picked up fragments of understanding, and pieced them together. Something had been discovered, something that would have been better left uncovered; a weapons cache, Olatz had reasoned. The men thought they knew who had passed on the information. Olatz's father had glanced over his shoulder at his daughter, in farewell, and gone away with the men.

He would return later that night, exhausted, his clothes stained with earth, his face hard, closed. He said nothing about what had happened. He would never speak of it. She never saw the two older men again; and when she next saw Ekai, his left eye was covered with a bandage. That was when the townspeople had begun to look away when he passed, to stop speaking of him, to wilfully forget that they had ever known him. He had become too dangerous to know.

She had spent that evening waiting, watching the sky, listening to the distant voice of the sea; she thought, for a while, that she could make out another voice behind it, but she understood nothing of what it said. She told herself it had only been her imagination.

Along in the house, she waited for the storm, but it never came.

Now, more than ten years later, she looked up at Ekai, wondering – again – what lay buried up at the clearing in the trees; but she could not see his eyes, so she could guess nothing from them. She took a breath, thinking to tell him about the voice, but changed her mind before she spoke. There was nothing to be said: she had understood nothing of what she had heard, and perhaps it had only been her imagination. She told herself it could not have been one of the voices of the dead.

Ekai leaned towards her and, echoing her thought, murmured: "You're not the only one who would be safer

not knowing. You understand?"

She nodded, though she was not sure that she did. Ekai spoke the language of the freedom fighter, all codes and double meanings, every word carrying more weight than it should. It was as if he could speak no other way, as if he had forgotten the very language he wanted to save.

"It isn't over," he told her softly. "It doesn't matter how many of us they lock away, or how many of us they kill. I have known the dead, Olatz. I must make sure their deaths were not for nothing."

"Must?" The word leapt into her mouth, but she swallowed it before it was spoken.

The game was coming to an end as she left the *fronton*. The crowd began to break up, wandering away in twos and threes, to the bars, or back to the sea. Soon the court would be empty, nothing more than three naked walls, with the summer wind whispering in the nooks and niches in the stone.

She could not sleep that night, and at first she did not know why. The threatening storm had failed to materialize, and the air was thick and muggy, waiting for the rains to clear it.

It felt as if something in the air were keeping her awake: a scent carried on the breeze, perhaps, or a sound, subtle and faint. The whisper of the wind, or the whisper of the water. After spending a couple of hours turning over and over, tying the bedclothes into what seemed an insoluble knot, she admitted defeat. With a sigh she climbed from the bed, struggled into her clothes, and hurried out of the house.

The town was not yet asleep. Out on the sea, the tiny lights of boats drifted on the water, like a handful of fallen stars. The bars were still open, spilling music into the air. There were couples on the shore, and families in the plaza. A few years before, Olatz would have been there herself, only returning home with the dawn. Now, she made her way through the town's quieter streets, past the nunnery, across the railway track, and on towards the mountain. She followed the grey stone wall up the mountainside, running her fingers along its knuckled back, until it dipped and vanished back into the earth. Then she stood a while on the edge of the trees, feeling cold and foolish, scolding herself for not having brought a light.

The sound of movement reached her from within the woods, and she tensed herself, ready to flee; but it was only the Englishman. In one hand he carried his notebook; in the other, a small electric lamp.

"What on earth are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question," she said, more sharply than she intended, as she remembered Ekai's warning. Then, relenting a little, she told him: "I thought I heard something."

"All the way from the town?"

"No. I don't know." She brought a small, pale hand to her mouth. "Maybe I was dreaming. I... dreamed I heard a voice."

To her surprise, Andrew nodded, understanding, and

beckoned her into the trees. Then she remembered that he had heard the voice before, at the clearing, or at least had been on the edge of hearing it. There were so few people who heard the voices of the dead; even in the Basque country, its mountains and forests laden with ghosts, she knew of only a few others beside herself. Ekai was one, of course, she thought wryly.

With this thought, she followed the Englishman along what remained of the path, glancing behind her as they crossed into the shadow of the woods. The trees had moved in behind them.

"Here," he whispered, when they had come to the site once more.

Slowly, Olatz approached the flat white stone at the centre of the site. Its pitted surface caught the delicate light of the stars, and of a sliver of moon. At its edge, she paused. Instead of stepping on to it, she knelt down in the grass, and placed the palm of her hand upon its cold hard face.

At once the voice returned, clearer now, its words echoing around the clearing. It was a woman, without a doubt – a woman with a soft, silken voice. In the moments of silence between her words, Olatz could hear her breathing.

The woman was speaking Basque. Olatz was sure of that now. The way the words were structured, agglutinating, each word bearing a weight of meanings, was enough to mark it out from any Indo-European language. Yet still she could not make out the meaning behind the words. The accent was strange, the vowel sounds unfamiliar, the rhythm of the stresses seemingly out of kilter. Olatz found herself wondering which part of the country the woman was from, before realizing that the language must have changed over time. The woman was speaking a language of the dead. It was Basque, and yet not Basque; and Olatz struggled to follow what was being said.

Kneeling beside her on the ground, Andrew whispered: "Can you understand it?"

"Some," she replied shortly, holding up a hand to ward off any further questions. After a moment she added: "I can't follow what she's saying, but I can catch fragments of it. She's talking to someone, someone behind her. She's asking them to leave her alone. Begging them."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

The voice grew louder: it was coming closer to the stone. Now there were other sounds behind it, footsteps, the measured, disciplined pace of soldiers. A man's voice, then, speaking not Basque but some other tongue, the words less sharp, the rhythms less pronounced. Olatz glanced across at the Englishman, who was leaning forward over the stone, his eyes closed, the better to hear. He frowned, his teeth pressing the blood from his nether lip, and after a moment he shook his head, dissatisfied.

"I don't understand. I don't understand! It's Latin, or something very similar, but I can't follow it."

"It must be a variation," murmured Olatz. "We don't know how long ago this happened. Maybe the Latin you know best is from another place, or a different period."

Andrew nodded unhappily. "Yes. I always thought the Latin we were taught was somehow not true Latin. It must have been only a... a slice, a cross-section in time, like a single layer from the strata—"

Olatz waved him into silence. Now the woman's voice could be heard again, speaking quickly, urgently, her words broken by sobs. There was a sound of sudden movement, and abruptly she fell silent. The man spoke then, his voice hard and low over the woman's ragged breathing.

Another movement, a rustle of cloth, and the man raised his voice. Though she still could not understand the words, Olatz realized with a shock that he was now speaking Basque — the same Basque the woman had spoken.

Then came the sound of a blow being struck, and a gasp, and then silence. From somewhere nearby came a muttering in this unfamiliar Latin, as the other soldiers spoke for a while amongst themselves. Then they were gone, and there was only the sound of someone weeping, keening; a lonely voice, wordless, the noise of it tugged back and forth by the wind.

Gradually it faded, until the wind was all that remained.

Olatz reached out and took the Englishman's hand.

Ekai found them in the early hours of the morning, not at the clearing but sleeping near the edge of the trees, curled up together by the wall of stones, beneath a couple of the Englishman's threadbare blankets.

Olatz drifted out of sleep as something cold nuzzled at her throat, and as the mantle of dream lifted slowly away she imagined it was a dog, one of the town's silver-grey huskies pressing its nose against her skin. From there her dream leapt lightly to the memory of one of the dogs, lying flat on the stone in a shaded corner of the plaza, suffering in the summer heat, its body moving with every breath, its tongue hanging from its mouth. She smiled, and woke.

Ekai was holding a gun to her throat. His other hand lifted to his mouth, and his lips gathered to kiss a raised forefinger. Olatz nodded, understanding; and Ekai slowly, quietly, moved the gun away.

"They're coming," he said, and suddenly hung down his head. Then he glanced back over his shoulder, along the path, down toward the sea. The early morning mist was fading, slowly burning away as the sun lifted higher in the sky. There was no one on the path; no one to be seen at all.

Olatz glanced from Ekai to the empty mountainside, and back again. "Who? Who's coming?"

"They are." His face twisted into a grimace, as it always did when he spoke of the government, or the Guardia Civil. As if the words carried an unwholesome taste. "I thought I'd got away, but there were more of them... They have someone with them. A traitor."

Olatz closed her eyes, and shook her head. "There are no traitors any more, Ekai. Not really. We're not occupied by Spain now, any more than we're still part of the Roman Empire. This isn't the time of Franco. Even back

then" — even before you got your scar, she thought, but did not say it — "*El Caudillo* had already been dead for years. Things are different now."

He tipped his head back, quizzically. "Are they? How have they changed? And don't tell me you don't believe in traitors, because I know how much you hate it when one of us goes to the other side — when they give up their names, and their language, and their history. When they stop remembering."

"You're right. I don't like it. But I don't think they should be killed, just because I disagree with them."

"Well, that's where we differ," he said; and suddenly he laughed, and it was as if he were a boy again. His smile cut through the years of struggle, of fighting and hiding, of being invisible, of making grand plans with those few others who spoke the same language as he.

"What's he doing here?" Ekai nodded contemptuously at the Englishman, who was snoring gently with a rock for his pillow. "I thought I told you not to bring him here."

"I didn't bring him," she insisted, then realized she sounded too defensive, and tried to make her voice more even. "He came on his own."

"Well, didn't I tell you to keep him away? And what were you doing here?"

"I heard something."

There was a silence. Then Ekai said: "A voice?"

"Yes."

"A woman's voice?"

"Yes." She took a breath, knowing that Ekai, too, had heard the voices in the clearing. She wondered what he had heard, whether it was the same thing she and Andrew had heard; and she wondered, too, whether the meaning he had wrung from it was the same.

Crouching before her, the mouth of his pistol pointing to the ground, he looked as if he wanted to execute the land itself; as if he thought the very earth had betrayed him. Then he put the gun away, pushing it roughly beneath his jacket, rose to his feet and walked away. Removing herself, carefully, from the blanket, Olatz followed him, casting a brief glance back at the Englishman to make sure he had not woken.

At the edge of the trees, Ekai said, without looking round: "You shouldn't have come to the clearing."

"I'm sorry." She did not know what she was apologizing for; but she could sense that something had been disturbed, some precious and precarious balance; and now Ekai was being hunted.

Tugging the dark glasses from his eyes, he put his hands on her shoulders, and looked at her for a moment. Once again, he smiled, and the smile twisted the scar that lay across his eye. Then the smile faded, like the morning mist.

"When they find me," he said, his voice falling to a murmur, softer even than the voice in the clearing, "they won't bring me back. You understand? Even if I give myself up, throw down my gun, put my hands to the sky, they won't bring me back. There will be a 'shootout' or an 'accident.' By some miracle, none of them will be hurt, but I'll have a bullet through my head."

"I don't understand," she whispered. The image of him

blurred for a moment, and she blinked away the tears that were building in her eyes. "Why? Why should they kill you?"

He dropped his gaze to the ground; then he looked back at her. He nodded, once; and she understood. The police had been told they would find something beneath the earth. Something that had lain there for years; something that would be enough to warrant his death.

"There had been a storm coming," he said, his eyes looking through her now, across the years. "It never came, but that evening the land was bathed in storm-light. We came to fetch your father, because we needed someone we could trust. Then, more than ever, we needed someone we could trust.

"It was a store of weapons, of course; we knew its location was no longer safe, and we had to unearth it, and give it a new hiding place. We brought the weapons up to the clearing, and began to turn the earth aside.

"But there was something else. Someone had given away the place where the weapons had been hidden." He closed his eyes, and once again his face twisted into a grimace. "She had the information beaten out of her. And when they had that information, they wanted more, and more. They told her it would be worse for her if she didn't talk."

Ekai fell silent. Olatz reached for his hand, held it between both of hers.

"It doesn't matter now," he whispered, his words barely audible above the gentle susurrations of the wind in the trees. "It was a long time ago. It feels as if it was another country."

"And the woman is dead," Olatz guessed.

"Yes." He looked up, some of his old pride showing now in his eyes. "She fought to the end. She was ready for them: when she heard them coming for her, she took a knife she had hidden in her clothes, and fought. But yes, she's dead. And the others, the ones who beat her – they died that same night."

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the hard shape of the bullet. "It was a game, when I was a child. We used to pretend that we would save our last bullet. You understand? If we couldn't save our country, then we would save our last bullet." He stepped back, away from her, and slipped the sunglasses back into place, covering his eyes again. "Now the game is real, and fate has brought me my last bullet."

"You can run," she told him. "Get away. Disappear."

Gently, he shook his head; and she fell silent, knowing he was right. He could not run. He would be caught. It was no longer the time of Franco; there were not so many people like her father left, people willing to hide him, to give him refuge. The ports, and the airports, would have his name and his picture. He could vanish into the Pyrenees, but he would not find safety when he reached the French border. There was no longer anywhere to run.

He moved away, into the shadow of the forest. As the limbs of the trees shifted and closed in behind him, he looked back, and spoke again; but Olatz did not hear, or did not understand.

Then he was gone, vanishing into the trees.

Olatz stared at the place where he had been. Then she turned away, back to the wall of stones. Andrew was awake; he was watching her from his place by the wall, a frown dividing his brow.

"Did you say something? I thought I heard you speaking."

"I was just talking to a... a friend."

His frown deepened. "I didn't see anyone."

The rest of the team arrived that day. They spent the morning examining the site, talking, making plans, tossing conjectures back and forth. Later, they unwrapped the tools they had brought, and began to turn the earth aside. The light began to fade early that day: the storm was returning, a bank of black cloud building, boiling over the sky.

Olatz sat crosslegged on the grass, beside the flat white stone at the centre of the site. The shadow of the storm moved upon its pitted surface. Behind her, Andrew was talking excitedly to one of the others, both of them on their knees, scraping the soil away from something they had found. Olatz glanced back at them, wondering what had risen from the earth, but realizing they would take their time in uncovering it. As yet, there would be nothing to see. The rest of the group were scattered around the site, one of them lifting her gaze to the sky, her eyes narrowing as she recognized the coming storm.

Olatz turned her attention back to the stone. Closing her eyes, she placed the palm of her hand upon its face; and as she did so, she heard the voices again.

They were playing out the same scene as before: the woman speaking first, in her silken voice, in that long-lost, unfamiliar Basque, pleading with someone to leave her alone. She was approaching the stone, followed by the soldiers.

Olatz heard the man's voice again, the rhythms of his archaic Latin; then the woman, responding, the sound of sobs breaking the words. Then silence, for a moment. The man spoke into the silence, his voice harsh, threatening.

She knew how it would go; she remembered how it went. The man left the tent – they must be in a tent, that was what made the rustle of cloth as he left. When he returned, he tried to persuade her by using her own language. Her language, Olatz realized, and also his own.

The woman struck him, then, and he left once more, to confer with the others. Left alone, the woman wept, and the wind outside seemed to be weeping with her.

Olatz kept her hand upon the stone, feeling the cold aching into her palm, and waited.

After a time, the silence was broken again. There were voices outside the tent, voices raised in alarm. The cruel hiss of a blade being drawn from its sheath. Then another sound, a sound that should not have been there, a sound that drew a curtain of silence behind it: a gunshot. Three more shots followed; then a moan of pain, and words that might have been a curse; then a fifth shot, and silence fell once more.

The woman in the tent sat very still, frightened, but no longer weeping. She drew out her knife, and held it

tightly in a trembling hand. She did not know what was outside the tent. Something bad, she thought, something worse than the Romans: a beast from out of the mountains, with a voice like the voice of a storm. It had killed the guards outside; one of them had lain keening on the ground, then was silenced as the beast cried out again. The woman raised her head, holding the knife close to her breast. Something was approaching: she could hear its footfalls outside, coming closer to the tent.

Olatz heard a rustle of cloth, and the sound of a voice. She knew the voice. She had been waiting to hear it. It was Ekai, trying to speak to the woman, to reassure her, to tell her not to be afraid. She could not understand him. He came closer, still speaking, still trying to make the woman understand.

Her blade whipped through the air; and then Olatz heard Ekai cry out, cursing as blood flowed from a cut across his eye.

Another gunshot sounded. The woman fell, the knife tumbling from her grasp, ringing like a coin on the ground. Then, for a long while, all was silent.

At last, Olatz heard the sound of footsteps, from outside the tent: more soldiers, she knew, from their measured pace, their disciplined tread. When they came upon the clearing, though, the pace was broken, as they ran to the bodies of their comrades. Closer by, she could hear Ekai laughing softly to himself as he fumbled for the last bullet. The bullet she had given him. There was a small, metallic sound as he emptied a chamber and slotted the bullet into place.

Quickly, she took her hand away from the stone, not wanting to hear the last gunshot.

"We'd better cover it up, and go," a woman was saying. "There's a storm coming. And the light isn't so good."

Another said: "Did you hear something?"

"Just the wind in the trees. Or maybe the sea. Sometimes the sound of the waves carries all the way up to the mountain."

Olatz stood up, slowly: her body felt suddenly weak. In a moment, the Englishman was beside her, his clothes stained with earth, his glasses askew. Though the dig seemed to have captured all his attention, he had noticed the way she was trembling as she got to her feet.

"Are you all right? You've gone all pale."

She nodded. "I'm fine. I just... I'll meet you by the wall."

"But we've found something. Something strange. Don't you want to see?"

She shook her head. "I know what you've found."

By the wall of stones, she sat listening to the gathering wind, looking at the words sprayed on to the rough, grey surface.

Euskal Presoak Euskal Herrira.

Basque prisoners to the Basque country.

When she had last seen it, the graffiti had been fresh, still wet and shining, trails of colour leaking from the edges of the words. Now it had dried, and already seemed old, as if it had been there for years.

She thought of Ekai, and of what it was that had held

him prisoner here. She would never really understand him – neither what he believed, nor what he had become; and she was no longer even sure when he had died. She might pick up fragments of understanding, here and there, but no more than that. Maybe, she thought, that would have to be enough.

With a small sigh, she turned to look out over the ranks of pines on the mountainside, past the lonely *caserio* on its shoulder of rock, past the houses of the town below, to the restless surface of the sea. Her hands upon the earth, her back to the ancient wall, she sat and waited for the storm, listening to the wind playing over the water, chasing its tail. It was whispering to itself, carrying half-formed words back and forth; echoing the language of the dead.

Alexander Glass is young, a Londoner, and prolific. His previous stories for *Interzone* were "Carla's Eye" (issue 130), "Upgrade" (issue 131), "Storage" (issue 132), "Loop" (issue 134), "The Mirror Repair'd" (issue 139), "Grandma's Bubble and the Speaking Clock" (issue 143) and "Forgotten Tongues" (issue 144). The above new story is a free-standing sequel to the last-named. In the past year or so he has also contributed stories to two other British magazines, *The Third Alternative* and *Scheherazade*. You'll be seeing many more from him.

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Of late, an increasingly common topic in American public discourse has been the amusing exploits of stupid criminals. While such stories were occasionally covered by local news programmes to add some levity to the proceedings, there is now an entire television show devoted to the subject — *America's Dumbest Criminals* — featuring chortling co-hosts who regale their studio audience with videotapes, reports, and re-enactments of various idiocies perpetrated by inept thieves, con artists, and felons. Anecdotes of this kind also percolate through the modern medium of urban folklore, endlessly forwarded e-mail messages.

A typical story: a would-be bank robber entered a Bank of America, wrote "This iz a stik-up" on a deposit slip, and stood in line to confront a teller. Suddenly worried that someone may have seen him writing the note, he left the bank and went across the street to a Wells Fargo Bank to stand in its line. When he handed the note to the Wells Fargo teller, she sensed his probable low intelligence and informed him, with a straight face, that she could not accept his hold-up note because it was written on a Bank of America deposit slip; he would have to leave the window, write his message on a Wells Fargo deposit slip, and get back in line. In response, the man meekly returned to the Bank of America with his note and again stood in its line, where he was identified and apprehended.

While such stories make the audience erupt with laughter, I never find them funny at all.

One problem is that I have spent many years teaching college classes in California prisons, so I have a first-hand awareness of the true punchline to these stories: "And so this poor doofus was arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to spend the next 25 years of his life in a bellhole." That, I think, rather spoils the joke.

While such sentiments might be dismissed as the idealistic blatherings of a soft-on-crime, bleeding-heart liberal, another disturbing question is raised by these reports: just *why* is America apparently suffering from a growing epidemic of moronic, incompetent criminals? Decades ago, when I was growing up, I recall hearing no stories of this kind. Indeed, the criminals in nonfiction and fiction, ranging from Al Capone to Lex Luthor, were usually portrayed as brilliant masterminds. Stupid criminals could be observed in some films and cartoons, but these were only the henchmen of evil geniuses, included as plot devices to provide the hero with a foe he could easily outwit to escape certain doom. No one imagined that these dimwitted

America's Dumbest Columnist

or

THE REMARKING MORON

Gary Westfahl

flunkies would ever attempt to set up their own operations.

Crime, in other words, was once recognized as what it is: a difficult and demanding occupation. Ignore any legal or ethical concerns and consider crime only as a potential career. A successful criminal, like any self-employed businessperson, must be highly motivated, efficient, and well-organized. Depending on his criminal specialty, he must master complex skills like safecracking, the use of firearms, laundering money, and setting up front organizations. He must have both the ability to meticulously plan his crimes and the improvisational intelligence to instantly devise and implement alternate plans when everything goes wrong. As anyone can see, crime isn't a job for dummies.

Then why are so many dummies embarking upon criminal careers? Well, there are positive aspects of this

chosen occupation: no application form, letter of recommendation, interview, experience, or education is required. Anyone and everyone can become a criminal. So, one may assume, many of these hapless felons were people who needed good jobs, couldn't find good jobs, and so were obliged to take the one good job they could find, being a criminal. And the results are not always funny. Television news programmes in Los Angeles covered the story, strangely ignored by the producers of *America's Dumbest Criminals*, of a 71-year-old woman, unable to pay her bills with her meagre pension and Social Security cheques, who bought a gun and attempted to hold up a nearby gas station. She was so terrible at it that the poor woman ended up leaving without taking the proffered money, though she was later identified and arrested. Does anyone feel like laughing at her?

At this point, non-American readers may wish to draw a polemical contrast between a senseless American system that drives the impoverished and the incapable into lives of crime, and sensible European systems that offer numerous programs and benefits to assist the needy and the unemployed. And they will hear no arguments from me. The point to make is that we are talking about two different kinds of welfare programmes: the reprehensible, expensive, and inefficient American programme of lifelong incarceration for millions of its citizens, and the benign, expensive, and inefficient European programme of expansive, cradle-to-grave welfare. One is better than the other, but neither is really desirable; an ideal society would have the vast majority of its citizens supporting themselves by gainful employment. My concern is whether, in an advanced technological society such as ours, this is still possible.

A century ago, any American or European man with a few years of basic education and a willingness to work could find a job that provided sufficient income to rent or purchase a home and support a wife and family. Now, according to one recent survey, over 70% of the jobs in America require a college degree, and many of the remaining jobs demand extensive training and specialized skills (such as car repair, which now involves some knowledge of computers). The situation in Europe is surely similar. And, if many good, decent people aren't quite capable of completing college or years of vocational education, what are they supposed to do, to keep themselves alive?

I am reminded of one of the most celebrated, and criticized, stories in

the history of science fiction: C. M. Kornbluth's "The Marching Morons." Its premise is that, since stupid people tend to have more children than smart people, we will end up with a future society mostly consisting of imbeciles, with a few intelligent people forced to work incessantly to keep all the morons alive. But the premise is incorrect: the correlation between a parent's intelligence and a child's intelligence is actually inconsequential, meaning that, in the long run, the descendants of people perceived to be stupid will be just as intelligent as the descendants of people perceived to be smart. Still, this fallacy fuelled an outpouring of racist and anti-immigrant hysteria in America, with effects that are still felt today, transforming this otherwise-amusing story into unpleasant reality.

There is, however, another way to realize Kornbluth's future society that does not invoke pseudoscience. Suppose that we simply raise our standards. If we define normal intelligence as an IQ of 100, then only a small minority of people can be classified as stupid. But if we redefine normal intelligence as an IQ of 120, then larger numbers of people will be reclassified as stupid. And if we redefine normal intelligence as an IQ of 150, then the vast majority of people will be reclassified as stupid.

This is what I fear may be happening in contemporary societies: as typical jobs demand more and more knowledge, more and more qualifications, more and more skills, fewer and fewer people will be able to handle them. So far, by completing intensive educational programmes and stressing themselves out, most citizens are keeping up with the ever-increasing demands of remunerative employment. Yet certain signs, like the noted increase in incompetent criminals and unemployment rates held steady by growing numbers of persons who have stopped looking for jobs, suggest that many are not keeping up, and their numbers are sure to grow. If the trend continues, the majority of good jobs in the future will call for geniuses, and in the context of such expectations, most people will indeed be marching morons.

While Kornbluth's story invites readers to arrogantly identify with the intelligent elite who will emerge as society's secret masters, I am, nowadays, more likely to cast myself as a moron. For our advancing civilization requires more and more knowledge and skills not only at the workplace, but in all aspects of life. It is in this respect that I often feel overwhelmed; I simply do not know many things that ordinary citizens are expected to

know. So while I may, unlike others, have education and wit enough to remain profitably employed until I retire, I lack the increasingly numerous ancillary skills that everyday life now requires.

That is: as a home-owner, I should be able to deal capably with plumbing and electrical problems, do basic carpentry and masonry, and keep my lawn and its plants vibrant and healthy. As a purchaser and user of appliances that require assembly, I should be able to assemble them, and later, to replace their faulty parts. As a regular commuter, I should be able to maintain and repair my car. As a writer who depends on a computer, I should be able to diagnose and correct any flaws in its hardware or software. Yet, with rare exceptions, I can't do any of these things. Of course, as my wife reminds me, some men in this world are still masters of many skills who productively spend their weekends wiring lamps, planting trees, constructing patios, and rebuilding carburetors while I fritter away my energies on writing. Yet even these purported polymaths, I suspect, sometimes face tasks that they hesitate to attempt, and the variety and difficulty of societally mandated skills will surely keep increasing.

In my own case, I try to cope in various ways. If the household problem is minor, my family and I simply adjust to it; so, for several years, my front doorknob hasn't worked properly, a hallway light has been broken, and one of the toilets needs to be flushed just right. With my computer, I have so far handled all difficulties by following my three basic steps of computer repair: 1) turn the computer off and turn it on again; 2) turn the computer off, wait a few minutes, and turn it on again; 3) turn the computer off, wait a *really long time*, and turn it on again. To solve other problems, I must call upon a series of repairmen and craftsmen. I have given up promising myself that I will someday buy a few books, engage in some practice, and learn these skills. Instead, I continue to endure the gut-wrenching feelings of utter helplessness and stupidity whenever I take my car to the shop or listen to a plumber explaining what new parts must be installed in my shower, and I have accepted the fact that I must keep working, as much and as hard as I can, to pay for the expensive help I need.

I have hit upon another, frequently noted, contemporary trend: while some unqualified people cannot work at all, many qualified people are constantly working overtime or are holding two or three different jobs. Social commentators repeatedly wonder:

why are so many people working so much? It may be because even the brightest and most talented persons cannot possibly master all of the skills that contemporary life demands, requiring that they work especially hard at what they do best to afford capable assistance or to compensate for its absence (like eating at restaurants because they cannot cook, or buying a new television set because they cannot repair their present set).

This represents the second of two respects in which the old predictions of science fiction have proven most spectacularly inaccurate. First, science fiction writers worried that advanced technology would lead to totalitarian superstates, like that of George Orwell's Big Brother, which monitored and controlled all aspects of their citizens' lives. Instead, recent decades have seen a growing trend towards democracy, as the world's Big Brothers have been falling one by one. Second, writers worried that advanced technology would eliminate the need for human employment, forcing citizens into dull and unfulfilling lives of enforced leisure. Instead, while a minority of citizens, due to disability or incompetence, enjoy leisurely lives at government expense, either at home receiving welfare checks or in prison cells, most people are working harder than ever, with little relief in sight.

The fallacy behind both fears is that advanced technology would empower the state, making ordinary citizens powerless and useless. In fact, as Alvin Toffler and others have noted, advanced technology empowers the individual. In industrial societies, we have all become our own Big Brothers, controlling our own lives to an unprecedented extent. With proper credentials and training, we can enjoy any number of stimulating, challenging jobs, along with tremendous freedom in our leisure time. The trouble is, being your own Big Brother is hard work; there is so much to know, so many tasks to perform, so many decisions to make, and every new option, every new "labour-saving" device, demands a new body of knowledge. Facing the burden of being their own one-person governments, many people unsurprisingly are barely hanging on, while others give up the game and surrender to lives of dependency – on relatives, charities, or the government – or foolishly embark upon ill-advised criminal careers that also lead to lives of dependency, sitting in prison cells.

Forgive me if this column seems less polished than others, but I have been working hard all year, and I currently feel overwhelmed by the many things that I still must accomplish. Perhaps you have been feeling the same way.

One has to credit McFarland & Co. with some bravery for publishing, in English, a massive encyclopedia of French genre fiction – *French Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror and Pulp Fiction*, compiled by Jean-Marc Lofficier and Randy Lofficier (McFarland, £45). One wonders just how many readers out there might be interested. Apparently the compilers could not sell a French-language edition, which says something about the French attitude towards science fiction. But I do applaud McFarland and the Lofficiers for persevering, because it's about time the French contribution to fantasy and science fiction was recognized. It's all too easy to think that French sf stopped at Jules Verne – though a small memory might spark and recall that *Planet of the Apes* was by another Frenchman – Pierre Boulle. And wasn't there someone called J.-H. Rosny *ainé* who produced a novel or two? (Well, more like 50 books, really, in a writing career of over 50 years.) In fact the French were way ahead of the British when it came to fantastic fiction – the Arthurian legends may have originated in Celtic Britain, but it was the French poet Chrétien de Troyes who developed them into full-blown *chansons de geste*. Then there was François Rabelais, with his clever satires featuring the giants Gargantua and Pantagruel; there was Cyrano de Bergerac, who didn't just fight duels because of his enormous nose, but wrote some of the very earliest space-travel stories; there were Madame d'Aulnoy and Charles Perrault who, between them, pretty well created the literary fairy tale; there was Antoine Galland who made the world dote on Oriental stories with *A Thousand and One Nights*; and then there was Voltaire, of course, and Racine, and Restif de la Bretonne and Jean de la Fontaine and Charles Nodier and Gautier and Balzac and... Hang on, let's pause for breath. And we haven't reached Verne yet.

As the compilers note in their all too brief introduction, it is frustrating that so little of French sf and fantasy is known in the English-speaking world, something that I have felt strongly about for years. Not that I've done much about it. I confess that like so many Americans and English my grasp of French is poor. Many years ago Damon Knight taught himself French in order to appreciate the original material that was appearing in France and even compiled an anthology of French sf. Now and again French sf would surface, due partly to the efforts of people like Maxim Jakubowski in England and Richard Nolane in France, both of whom compiled anthologies of French sf in English

The Other Side...

Mike Ashley

translation. Donald A. Wollheim also sought out French sf for DAW Books, publishing some interesting surprises. Back in 1972 Pierre Versins produced one of the first truly comprehensive science-fiction encyclopedias, but it was in French. Although he treated the whole world of sf he incorporated references to much European sf often ignored by the English-speaking world – and still pretty much ignored because all too few could read (let alone afford) that massive tome. On the whole the vast sea of French sf remains lost to English-speakers, and it is our loss as much as it is that of the French. At least this volume can help set the balance straight and

allow us to recognize what has been published, even if most of us still won't be able to read it.

So, how is this new book going to help? Firstly let's note that the editors try to cover the whole of the French-speaking world, not just the country of France, so they also cover Belgium, Switzerland and French Canada. Also, the book's subtitle is "A Guide to Cinema, Television, Radio, Animation, Comic Books and Literature." In fact the marketing emphasis seems to be on the cinema. Not only does the cover suggest *Planet of the Apes*, but Stephen Bissette's foreword discusses films to the exclusion of almost everything else. Moreover the volume is divided internally into two "Books," and the first book deals with the Cinema, Television, Radio and Animation – in fact everything beyond books and magazines.

To get an idea of the scale of coverage of this book, it is in large format (8½ x 11 inches) and runs to 787 double-columned pages. There has to be close to half-a-million words here. The first third of the book (up to page 294) is the section given over to the visual media, so around two-thirds looks at literature. That first third is itself divided into a preamble and six sections, "Cinema," "Television," "Radio," "Animation," "Comic Books and Graphic Novels" and "Selected Biographies" (this last is split into film-makers and comic-book writers and artists). Each of these sub-sections has an historical overview, usually only a page or two, and then a series of alphabetical entries on the relevant subject. Something like 500 films are covered and almost as many television series and TV



REVIEWED

FRENCH SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY, HORROR AND PULP FICTION





movies. The biggest sub-section is on comic books and graphic novels, which has always been a more popular medium in France (and especially Belgium) than in Britain or America (at least until recently). One has only to think of Asterix the Gaul or Tintin or Barbarella as notable popular examples. And, of course, the magazine *Heavy Metal* was an American edition of the French *Métal Hurlant*.

The second "Book," which covers printed books and magazines, is broken down into a preamble plus twelve sections. Nine of those sections are historical, tracing through the development of fantastic fiction over 900 years. Section 1 is "The Middle Ages," looking at the *chansons de geste* and fables. Then come "The Renaissance" (1500-1650), "The Enlightenment" (1650-1800), "19th Century Fantastique" and "19th Century Science Fiction" (both 1800-1914), then Fantastique and Science Fiction "Between the Wars" (1918-1950) and finally Modern SF and Modern Fantasy. Section 10 gives an overview of French-Canadian SF and Fantasy. Section 11 is a massive dictionary of authors, running for nearly 300 pages, though it's really more a bibliography as it says nothing about the authors.

The historical segments are the best part of this book. They give a fascinating perspective on French sf and fantasy and it is really here that you learn about the authors, since it is the historical survey that discusses and analyses the fiction. It means you have to use the index a lot, and though the index looks comprehensive – after all it's 30 pages long, four columns a page – it's actually not as helpful as it could be. For instance Pierre Boulle isn't listed in the index at all, though he has an entry in the dictionary segment and turns up on page 427 (which took me five minutes to find). When I tried to find out more about Claude Veillot, the index page-references all pointed me to film and television adaptations. Yet the entry on Veillot in the dictionary segment also refers me to Chapter IX (but no page reference). Eventually, after wading through all 45 pages of Chapter IX I found him on page 441, though it still did not tell me what I really wanted to know about Veillot.

The multi-segment approach and the idiosyncratic index thus make this volume difficult to use. You remain convinced there is much in there of value, but you have to invest a lot of time to find it. It does not really work as an encyclopedia, but it works well as an historical survey with bibliographic support. It's only as you work through the book that you realize just how many French sf writers have made themselves known beyond their

country. Take this small selection of names from the section on Modern SF: Gérard Klein, Michel Jeury, Philippe Curval, Stefan Wol, Michel Demuth, Pierre Barbet, Boris Vian, René Barjavel, Vercors, Georges Langelaan, Daniel Walther. I'm sure almost all of those will be recognized by serious readers of science fiction.

But, of course, for every one of those names there are 50 or more others not known and not translated. I'm certainly intrigued by many of the works mentioned. Take Ayerthal, a name I'm not familiar with. Have his books been translated? I'm not aware of them. Yet *L'Histrion* (1993) and *Sexomorphoses* (1994), which tell of a planet-sized computer that seeks to manipulate lives in a Dune-like universe, sound like something I want to read. Then there's French "new wave" writer, Pierre Andreon, whose many books include *Le Désert du Monde* (1977), about man's last days on Earth. I can't find reference to that having been translated. And going further back there's Jean Quatremaire's *Alors la Terre s'arrêta* (1934) where Earth's population is almost entirely destroyed when an asteroid crashes into the Moon. Some authors are immensely prolific. Pierre Saurel's bibliography is nearly 18 columns long. Apparently all

the books are in a James Bond-like superspy series full of super-scientific gadgets and mad scientists – all good old pulp fare that must make Saurel amongst the most prolific of writers, with nearly 1,000 titles listed here. They might all be crap, but his name never seems to surface in discussions about prolific writers.

This volume is teeming with mentions of books I've never heard of by authors I don't know, revealing a French science-fiction tradition seemingly unknown outside of the French-speaking world. I've no idea whether all these books are as good as they sound, but it is intensely frustrating not to be able to have access to them.

For all the awkwardness of using this book as a quick reference, it is a wonderful window into a world lost to us ignorant monolingualists. The book is well illustrated with many book covers plus some (but not enough) author photos. It's certainly a book I shall refer to on many occasions. I think the Lofficiers have done a remarkable and laudable job. It will be interesting to see how much their achievement is recognized and whether it makes any difference at all to the understanding and appreciation of French science fiction.

Mike Ashley

Absolutely Harmless

Chris Gilmore

Among North Americans of liberal disposition there's a tendency, going back to Ray Bradbury at least, to sentimentalize fictional Mexicans. I presume it's in reaction to the tendency of illiberal Americans to exploit and brutalize actual Wetbacks, though I suspect a proud Mexican *hidalgo* would prefer to waive such "compensation." There's also a tendency, throughout the English-speaking world, to attribute to Irishmen thick heads and chippy shoulders (so much for Sheridan, Yeats, Wilde, Dunsany). Since Charles de Lint's *Forests of the Heart* (Tor, \$29.95) exemplifies both

tendencies, it may be accused of being a racist novel: those who fear contamination BALE OUT NOW.

Reading it for its literary qualities, I found myself muttering, "women's writing." This is because, though most of de Lint's viewpoint characters are strong-minded women with inherited powers of witchcraft, he suffers from the common male prejudice that female thinking is inherently fuzzy. To illustrate this, he stuffs their thought-processes with unnecessary words: "she was of half a mind to simply walk right out of the cottage now..." "Was of" is a poor substitute for "had," and

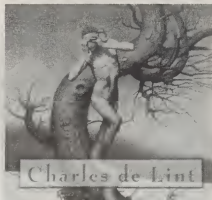
the clause would read crisper without "simply," "right" and "now"; but Ellie (one of his heroines) is a woman, see, whose cranial peristalsis would seize up without verbiage.

Not that de Lint's own narrative style is flawless: he describes a restaurant as "one of the only places" to serve Devon cream, a usage indefensible to defend, let alone perpetrate. I consequently read this book with rapidly mounting irritation – regretably, as his plotting is complex but well thought-out and the central conceit is original.

All places have their *genii locorum*, quasi-immortal beings who usually team up with the magically talented of whatever races currently hold the land. So it is in Mexico, where the Hispanics have reached an arrangement with the spirits the Indians knew; but in North America it's a bit more fraught, as some Irish spirits have tagged along with the immigrants. Having no places of their own, they plan to dispossess the locals (known to the Indians, ignored by the Whites), to do which they need a brand-new artefact of great power, such as can only be fashioned by a witch. They also need a mortal man to wield it (and be burnt out by it, but that's a detail). In their fleshly manifestation, they look, sound and behave like a Continuity IRA battalion that has just been expelled en masse for excessive use of force, and wants to take it out on someone. Those who know them call them "the Gentry," just as the Greeks knew the Furies as "the Eumenides."

Formidable foes, and with preternatural strength. Ellie, who is a witch but doesn't know it, unwisely accepts the commission to make them their object, to the dismay of Bettina, a sweet, innocent young Mexican witch who knows enough to be scared stiff, and sundry others of various power and sensitivity who get dragged in, mainly through ties of blood or friendship to herself or Donal, a naive young Irish American whom the Gentry have set up to be wielder/fall-guy.

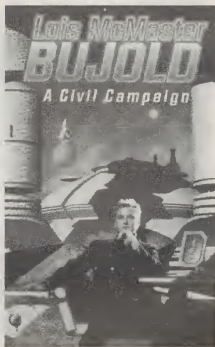
Exploration of these characters takes up a lot of the first half of the book, to the detriment of pace. De Lint also drags in by the ears numerous references to the arcane snobberies and shibboleths of pop (the leading male character runs a music shop, you see), which have nothing whatever to do with the story, and which are explained but not excused by his extensive luvvy page. The entire effect is monstrously self-indulgent, but if your self is more or less like de Lint's, feel free to indulge: it's ingenious in places, absolutely harmless throughout and improves notably in the second half (where de Lint should not have left a thundering great loose end, but that's another detail).



Forests of the Heart

The academic study of popular literature is often, and rightly, condemned as practising sociology under false colours; but one sometimes encounters writers, and texts, which seem to be of more social than literary significance, and such an approach is then justified. George Orwell's famous essay on the comics of his time is the *locus classicus*, but anyone who can account for the popular appeal of Lois McMaster Bujold deserves a PhD.

This is not to denigrate her as a writer; her style is easy, and in the current offering, *A Civil Campaign* (Earthlight, £6.99), four major and several minor sub-plots are deftly balanced. Yet she's by no means a ground-breaker – quite the reverse.



Reviewing her *Borders of Infinity* in *Interzone* 71, I commented that she seemed to be aspiring to the mantle of Poul Anderson, at least as far as Dominic Flandry was concerned; with this addition to the biography of Miles Vorkosigan, she has established herself solidly on H. Beam Piper's patch. Piper is described in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* as "Not in general an innovative writer" and killed himself in 1964 – in response to his own perception that he was by then old hat. Bujold has adopted, along with his tone, postulates very much within his mindset. These include widows' weeds which are instantly recognized as such, rather than a mere taste for black; powerful hereditary Counts who serve an hereditary emperor and employ liveried "Armsmen" (men-at-arms); professional freelance marriage-brokers; and intelligent, influential women who achieve their principal effects, not by the deployment of any authority which they hold in their own right, but by manipulating men. She also uses a vocabulary best described as SF house, c. 1955. For transport the people use groundcars and aircars, the upper crust protect their palaces with force fields, and the epilepsy Miles now suffers on top of his other physical afflictions stems from a needle-bomb injury.

Although set exclusively among the ruling caste and its retainers, none of the plotlines which interweave through the book is of world-shattering social significance, having to do with whether various gentlemen will succeed in persuading various ladies to marry them; whether a new foodstuff can be marketed successfully, despite its unappealing origins; whether Count Vorbretten can hang onto his District, despite the newly disclosed illegitimacy of his grandfather; whether the extreme methods adopted by Lady Donna will succeed in preserving her District from her rascally cousin; whether Count Vornuir, who has already sired over a hundred daughters, can be persuaded to sire no more. In short, we have here a synthesis of 1950s sf and the 1920s society novel.

I should add that most of her cruces allow Bujold to introduce a joke or two, of which some are distinctly off-colour, and almost all worked for me – but then, I'm an old fart. Who are the rest of the audience? Whoever they are, they'll find this book great value for money if their eyesight is good. Earthlight have managed to cram 45 lines to the page, and the print is tiny. If you know someone who's hooked on Heinlein juveniles, and needs something to grow into, look no further – except to check that his or her optical prescription is up to date; too much of this sort

of thing can make you go blind.

Oh yes, as regards optical perception ... Bujold states, several times, that if a man and a woman are of equal height, the woman will appear the shorter. My own perception, which I had assumed to be universal, has always been the precise opposite: to me, Barry Humphries always looks taller as Dame Edna than as Sir Les. There's no "right" answer, but has anyone done a survey?

One of the very few literary shocks I can remember experiencing as a child was when, aged about eleven, I first encountered H. G. Wells's "The Cone." It was my introduction to serious horror, and I stumbled upon it on one of my childish forays into the adult world. In retrospect, I recognize it as the best possible encounter. To have been formally introduced by an adult would have been... well, as if my father had bought me my own copy of *Playboy*, instead of leaving me to pore and paw over battered copies of *Health & Efficiency* (stolen from someone's elder brother) behind the urnals with the other boys.

I therefore have my reservations about the concept behind Ann Halam's *Don't Open Your Eyes*, as it's being brought out on the Dolphin (older children) imprint at £4.99. Horror for children? Doesn't seem quite right – but to the book. It begins as a rather pious teenage romance, reminiscent of Ursula Le Guin's *Very Far Away From Anywhere Else*, though the principals are a little younger and a lot less bright. Fourteen-year-old Giselle (Diesel to her friends) is from a respectable, upwardly (if slowly) mobile, black family. Having escaped from a hell-hole of a council flat to a largish Victorian terrace with its own garden, they discover to their dismay that next door houses a downwardly mobile white family – if one can so describe it. Dad being absent and Mum rarely present and usually drunk when there. The eldest (17-year-old) Jason is therefore supporting himself (and presumably the other two) by fixing cars in the garden – for car-thieves, it's suspected. On the other hand, though they're certainly rough, they don't seem entirely bad, and Diesel finds herself attracted to Martin, the 15-year-old second son.

Now, to describe the courtship of such a couple without descending to the prurient, the sentimental or both must be a daunting challenge. I can't think of a single writer, living or dead, whom I'd trust to get it right. Le Guin bottled out by leaving hers unconsummated; Halam battles her less subtly, by having Martin kill himself joy-riding in a stolen car on page 45. End of story? Not quite: through a procedure



which takes all her considerable skill to make believable, Halam has Martin return as a ghoul.

A ghoul, as Lovecraft remarks somewhere, is no proper companion for mankind. For the rest of the book, Jason and Diesel are therefore frantic to lay the poor chap to rest – a process made no easier by their mutual dislike, and their understandable denial that such things can truly be happening. The resulting tension ensures that the drama never flags, but fails to invest it with plausibility at any level. One watches helplessly as Halam boxes herself and her characters into an ever tighter fix, from which it seems only a *deus ex machina* can possibly rescue them. And of course, that's what she provides – what else



did you expect? As a character study of a sweet-natured, not-very-bright young girl under appalling pressure the book has considerable power – but Halam balks at all her serious fences. For that reason I can't really recommend it to anyone, of any age, unless... Is there a genius out there somewhere who's capable of completing the appallingly difficult love-story Halam ditched on page 45? Anyone who can will produce one of the great milestones of English letters.

There's a form of anti-utopia (as distinct from dystopia) which I would classify as the barrio story. It presumes that in the near future the combination of triumphant capitalism and advanced technology will produce, potentially, the good life for everyone, whether they choose to work or not. There will also be a savage backlash against both environmentalism and the Nanny State, with the result that the rich will live in unexamined luxury, hygiene and security, while the poor live on state handouts and (mainly) their wits, in fetid, unpoliced slums conveniently nearby. The convenience is crucial, for the rich, as ever, will want glamour and excitement – and where better to find both than in the barrios, who offer raucous music, unwholesome food, scabrous entertainment and willing flesh of whatever colour and gender m'sieur's prefers tonight – and all spiced with unquantifiable danger?

Since the alternative is the sort of thing envisioned by E. M. Forster ("The Machine Stops"), Jack Williamson ("With Folded Hands") and John Lennon ("Imagine"), I'll vote for a barrio future against any plausible opposition; but that happiness must be spiked with guilt for what it has to say about our originally sinful condition, and regret for those who wind up paying the necessary price of genuine danger. Such is the theme of Noel K. Hannan's collection, *Shenanigans* (Pondragon, £6.99). It comes with a slightly breathless introduction by Ian Watson, who describes Hannan as "a dab hand at thinking big," among other infelicities, but while none of the ideas are at all new, he approaches them with linguistic competence, stylistic brio and a welcome absence of gravitas.

The book opens with a rather heavy-handed allegory of Original Sin, but having paid his scot, he sets about his celebration thereof. The cover picture (a cheerful, Scottish stripper brandishing a plastic gun) has little connection with the text (though you can just about link it to the second story), but it sets the tone well enough. Good value, and worth a second read, though probably not a third.

Chris Gilmore

Even in a year of outstanding sf and fantasy collections, Michael Swanwick's *Tales of Old Earth* (Frog, Ltd/Tachyon, \$25) is a *nonpareil*. The 19 stories gathered here, all but one dating from the 1990s, are restless, cogent, sardonic, precise, superb examples of narrative craftsmanship in miniature, each expressing its moral or ironic point with great style and marvellous economy. The idiom of the sf genre has rarely been employed with such fluent intelligence as here; yet Old Earth, the Earth of the present and the past, is as much this book's subject as is its whirling dance of hazarded futures.

As an example of Swanwick's technique, consider "The Mask," at a mere six pages the shortest piece in *Tales of Old Earth*. The ornate flamboyance of the past is very much present; masked aristocrats walk the Rialto of Venice, sexual and political intrigue is everywhere, archaic creeds of duplicity and honour are implicitly invoked. But the technologies that enable this scenario are of the future, as are speculative incongruities: how do titled personages lead "Communes"? And then the amorous interlude of Lady Nakashima and a defecting engineer from Green Hamburg – the Renaissance fornicating with a cyberpunk future – is focused like a sudden concatenation of lenses on the myopia and peccadilloes of the corporate present, in a brief and brusque but resounding punchline. A vivid marriage of tenses (their styles, sensibilities, and characteristic paraphernalia wedded with seamless mischief) segues into an argument of immense forceful pertinence: postmodern moralism at its most acute.

Just as illustrative, and even more effective, is "The Wisdom of Old Earth" (eleven pages). Here Swanwick takes one of the great intellectual fallacies of the past, the notion that evolution is an upward movement, a teleology conferring genetic superiority on its beneficiaries, implants it in the mind of an ambitious woman of a conspicuously devolved far future, and finally springs a cruel trap, one that condemns her as an evolutionary dead end and dismisses crushingly any contemporary suppositions of the inferiority of others. To read such pieces is to learn just how devastating a form of narrative rhetoric the short story can be, and not one of the entries in *Tales of Old Earth* fails to drive the lesson home.

However far he ranges in space and time, Swanwick always has the present in his cross-hairs. "The Very Pulse of the Machine" (a Hugo Award winner in 1999) may postulate that a moon is a machine, and "Microcosmic Dog" (a clever homage to a similarly-titled classic by Theodore Sturgeon) may make antic play with geometries of scale in reconceiving New York as a

The Marriage of Tenses

Nick Gevers

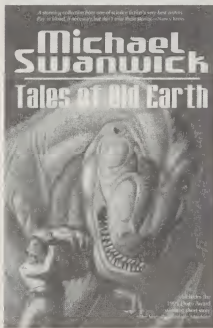
solipsist's shell, but both address a painfully immediate dilemma of Faith. "Radiant Doors" may appropriate the manner of the hard-boiled sf yarn and colonize a near future with a more remote one, but it addresses most centrally the folly of expecting the worst. "Mother Grasshopper" is utterly whimsical in depicting starshiploads of humans settling a gargantuan insect of space, with Ray Bradbury's folkiness in the background and his eerie morbidity in the foreground, but the implication that we vermin is inescapable, as is the greater perspective that we are vermin even to those we consider vermin ourselves. "Wild Minds" is about a future of post-human modification, but it sets out limits on that process that are timeless rather than speculative.

Rather like James Tiptree in her 1970s heyday, Swanwick has a particular grasp of the fictional modes of Death. "The Dead" turns industrial-

scale resurrection into a revolutionary nightmare for the elite (as in Ian McDonald's *Necroville* [1994]), but echoes also "The Dead" by James Joyce in its final limp universalism. In "Radio Waves," the recently deceased are fading signals of themselves, riding electrical cables, resisting galvanic predators, and contemplating fearfully the empyrean whose background radiation they ineluctably will join; but they are also seeking authentic psychological closure. "North of Diddy-Wah-Diddy" features the train that transports the damned to Hell and Hell's marginally less infernal suburbs; but its journey is also one on the Underground Railroad, to liberation and beyond. In contrast, the bleakly comic dialogue of "Midnight Express" occurs between two rail passengers in Faerie, one of whom is the certain corrupter and nemesis of the other; and "The Raggle Taggle Gypsy-O," a story original to this collection, boisterously considers, amidst its riffs on Roger Zelazny, E. R. Eddison, Philip Jose Farmer and many others, the paradox that immortality is only possible through the memories of those left behind when we perish...

Other tales are less funereal, but at least as scathingly forceful. "In Concert" exploits a dubious pun ("Lennonism," in essence) to suggest just how much Communism and rock-'n'-roll eventually disappointed their followers; "Ancient Engines" is an Asimovian reflection on a singular and singularly dispiriting paradox of technology; and "Walking Out," after a mild joke at the expense of Terry Bisson, explores a tragic extreme of claustrophobia. "Scherzo With Tyrannosaurus" and "Riding the Giganotosaur" are tantalizing sketches for Swanwick's forthcoming novel *The Jaws of Time* (title decidedly tentative), weaving respectively a very stark web of time paradoxes and a portrait of a corporate buccaneer who learns humility amidst the slapstick savagery of the Cretaceous. And long evolutionary perspectives are proffered by a couple's antique refrigerator in "Ice Age," an early story whose whimsical manner slyly imparts the vertigo such vistas must induce.

The greatest highlight, the most intricately structured and intellectually provocative item in *Tales of Old Earth*, may well be "The Changeling's Tale," which thus deserves a special mention. This short venture into full-blown fantasy is avowedly a tribute to Tolkien, but its recursive tracings of memory and temptation act to sour the Tolkienian formula, deriding its excesses of length and sentiment, dismissing its moral pretensions, demanding in congnid mood that fantasy address at last the urgencies of





the real. The 18 pages of "The Changeling's Tale" say more than the multiple volumes of any Tolkienian epic, and indict them as

thieves of time, and squanderers of paper.

Tales of Old Earth may well emerge as the best collection of 2000, perhaps

the year's best sf book in any category. It is exhilaratingly disturbing, a Pandora's Box of 19 inestimable gems.

Nick Gevers

Ramsey Campbell might have written the novel of his life.

It's hard to say for sure. Without the benefit of hindsight it's impossible to gauge these things accurately: but it seems so. It *seems* as though he has used his years in the business and his experience as a family man to wring out another compassionate and dirty tale of urban unrest and emotional misheaval. It *seems* as though it's the best thing he's written in the last ten years, which going by his ever-present elevated standards is no small complement. In my honest opinion, Ramsey Campbell is the finest practitioner of horror fiction that ever lived. In a career that has already spanned thirty years, he has seldom put a foot wrong; and although the public's recent lukewarm reception to his favoured style of highly literary, occasionally – jokey tales of terror has led the author to feel he must change his dancing – shoes (the last two books, available only on import, have been non-supernatural and closer to books like *The Face That Must Die* or *The One Safe Place*) – there has been no sense of compromise. What we get is a sense that Campbell will pursue his vision to the grave.

And then from nowhere, this: quite possibly the book of his career. It is called *Silent Children* (Tor/Forge, \$24.95) and it picks up the baton, to some extent, of earlier work: it continues the author's preoccupation with the perils and perilousness of childhood. A mother lives with her son in the house – in which a builder buried one of his child victims. The builder –

Everything Must Go

David Mathew

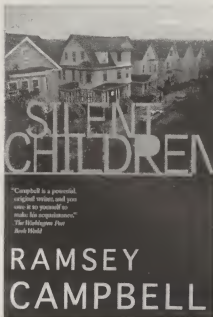
a man obsessed with helping children, but who then kills his charges if they disappoint him – is not nearly as dead as everyone assumes, and having not drowned at sea, sets about altering his appearance. This includes removing his own teeth with a pair of pliers. Meanwhile a lodger moves into the same family home, intent on writing a book about the serial killer. He is much admired by the teenaged boy, but is then revealed to have been less than forthcoming with the truth. For example, perhaps he already knew more about the killer than he had revealed. Then the boy's half-sister, from the father's new family, goes missing.

This novel in one of cord progressions: the cord squeezes tighter. And there's a shriek in the background that gets louder. Tie a capital plot to 352 pages of Campbell's attention to detail – "Baz healed the door shut as they followed Shaun into the front room, where shabby chairs faced a television crowned with a video recorder and cable box. The furniture left space only for a plasterboard bar in one corner, where three bottles of spirits hung their heads on the wall. On top of the bar a quartet of crumpled empty cans of Skol guarded the corners of a car repair manual bristling with yellow slips of paper" – and we have a document of note, a plumb example of craft and storytelling finesse, and a feast of shadows and nightmares.

Eric Brown's *New York Nights* (Gollancz, £16.99) is "Volume One of the Virex Trilogy" and it's a marvelous beginning to the sequence. Unexpected, too. What we have come to

expect from Brown are psychological science-fiction stories, in which the action on screen, as it were, is only 50 percent of what should be considered: the rest is "big trouble upstairs" – it's cranial damage, it's internal... With this particular novel, there is a good deal of action and a good deal of thought about action, but the former outweighs the latter, and this book is enjoyable for the straightforward detective story it is. (I enjoyed it immensely.) Detectives in the Big Apple investigate the disappearances of members of a radical chic new lesbian scene, and very funny lines are in evidence. This being Eric Brown, of course, an author we've come to trust, there is no need to fear the tightrope – the tightrope which seems too thick, too easy to walk across, with the book's rigorous ignorance of cliché – because matters become much more involved and complicated at precisely the point that they need to be. *New York Nights* is a notable performance, pitch-perfect; and Brown is an excellent writer.

PS Publishing has produced a quartet of new trade-paperback novellas, which are rather stiffly-priced at £8 each. My favourite was *Naming of Parts*: a wonderful zombie story by rising star Tim Lebbon. Stephen Baxter gives us *Reality Dust*, a weighty space opera, whereas *Tendeleo's Story* by Ian McDonald is a fine addition to the author's "Chaga" sequence. Furthermore, on the subject of the McDonald, it has the rare and noteworthy privilege of an informative introduction by Robert Silverberg. Should the presence of a good introduction be taken for granted? Per-

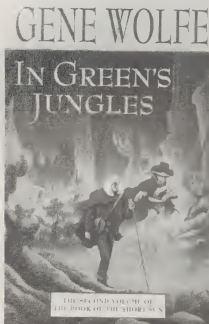


haps, but it *cannot* be taken for granted. All of PS Publishing's novellas are packaged nicely, with decent monochrome covers that make the books look attractive when laid side by side; but the quality of the introductions varies wildly. Greg Bear's intro, for example, to the Baxter is real "A-is-for-Apples" stuff, and I wish he hadn't bothered. The last of the novellas is *Watching Trees Grow* by Peter F. Hamilton. We peek once more into this talented author's broad and faintly old-fashioned brain, and it is nice to see him working at a much shorter length than usual.

In Green's Jungles (Tor, \$24.95) is "Volume Two of the Book of the Long Sun" by Gene Wolfe, and it's a riveting and a delicately-composed storm of story. From the opening scene, in which our narrator, Horn, negotiates with a sewer-designer, this book (I say again) is a *storm*: because *storm* is the word I encountered, the word I bumped up against, on many occasions during my reading. The vestigial dreams that Horn indulges: these are but leaves – blown willy-nilly in the tempest. In the previous volume, Horn embarked upon an adventure to locate the heroic leader, Patera Silk. The chase is still on, but more plot is at stake. It seems, for example, that Horn has taken on a likeness to the very man he pursues. Cue misunderstandings, cue memories... Gene Wolfe writes with exceptional poise and gravitas and understatement – and his prose is very much the eye of the hurricane. The eye of grief. So much is theatred outside the boundary walls that it's impossible to ignore the external events. So this book is the intermezzo: the thought-quenched middle volume, and recommended.

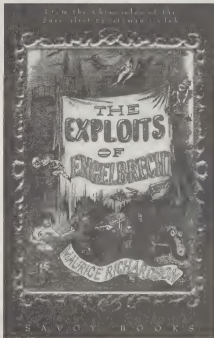
Likewise, Robert Sawyer's *Calculating God* (Tor, \$23.95). It has come to my attention that this book is doing extremely well in the Canadian charts (Canada being the author's home), and more power to Sawyer's elbow for this at least, but also for much else. Sawyer comes in for some torrid press in this country, but personally I have always enjoyed the work I've read. Moreover, the new novel – a blindingly swift meditation (if that's not an oxymoron) on the nature of evolution, and the evolution of nature, with alien contact, respectable jokes, games of morals and other ingredients lacing the mix – is the best Sawyer cocktail yet.

Allow me, finally, to give you some information. The website address is www.savoy.abel.co.uk and the new snail-mail address is 446 Wilmslow Rd, Withington, Manchester M20 3BW. (Are you making notes?) The phone number is: 0161-445 5771



and the fax number is 0161-446 2894...

These are the details for Savoy, and Savoy is a publishing company that until recently advertised itself (quite accurately) as "The Most Banned Publishing Company in Britain." Not that this fact alone would be a reason to summon up memories of my ghastly nine months in telesales, way back when, by turning myself into a pulsing publicist. But I feel that these guys could do with a line or two of attention, given that they experience the customary frustrations of a small operation when it comes to distribution, and furthermore, given that Savoy has only recently pulled itself out of a commercial doldrums – and has come out



fighting as hard and fast and *canily* as the boxer in the first product I would like to mention needs to.

Following last year's publication of a *Reverstorm* comic and a CD of P. J. Proby reading Eliot's *The Waste Land*, *The Exploits of Engelbrecht* (Savoy Books, £20) is by Maurice Richardson, and it is rare and needful and funny. Recommended. It's a reprint, of course, the stories having appeared in *Lilliput* magazine, which according to James Cawthorn, "lived its finest hours during the subsequent years of paper shortages and the ingeniously expressed hostility of eighty million neighbours across the English Channel" after the Second World War. The magazine died in the 1960s, but these stories have found new fosters: the indefatigable arms of the good people of Savoy Books. They have given us this gift – this result of their stern care and tough love.

So here we have 15 stories about Engelbrecht, a "dwarf surrealist boxer" who has to punch the lights out of various grandfather clocks and indulge in crazy mayhem... Every once in a while you might read a lazy journalist who, in trying to describe something beyond his wordstore, says something like: "It's unclassifiable... It's impossible to talk about." And of course I snootily look down on such copping-out; but really, how do you describe a character like Engelbrecht? Except to say that there are some great one-liners: One of the boxer's opponents has "got a classic stance, hour hand well forward, minute hand guarding his face. They've mounted him on castors with ball bearings, and his footwork is as neat as a flea's." Or: "there are ugly rumours that Engelbrecht's manager, Lizard Bayliss, slipped that Clock a couple of hundred hours to lie down." It's amazing.

Maurice Richardson lived from 1907 to 1978, and by some accounts was as "difficult" as his prose is delightful. A drinker, curmudgeon, fighter, Richardson was the sort of man who could never honestly utter the phrase, "It would never happen to me." From the introduction (Cawthorn) and the afterword (Michael Moorcock) we get a glimpse into this writer's brain, with its interests in boxing, psychiatry, women, snakes, insects. But the stories will tell you more about this madman than any number of non-fiction pieces; and the wonderful internal illustrations – some originals by Ronald Searle, James Boswell and Gerald Hoffnung, and some new ones by Kris Guidio, John Coulthart and Cawthorn – admirably aid our visualization. Surrealism might have lost some of its appeal in recent years, but you wouldn't think so to regard the sheer joy of this first-class package.

David Mathew



BOOKS RECEIVED



AUGUST 2000

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Aldiss, Brian W. **A Chinese Perspective**. "Science Fiction Rediscovered, 1." James Goddard [Flat 4, 13 Lockwood St., Drifffield, East Yorkshire YO25 6RU], no ISBN, 72pp, saddle-stitched paperback, £7.95. (Sf novella, first edition as a separate book; this title of the "Zodiacal Planets" originally appeared in Christopher Priest's anthology *Anticipations* [Faber, 1978]; the text has been revised, and Aldiss provides a new short introduction; copies may be ordered via the Official Brian W. Aldiss website: <http://www.brianwaldiss.com>.) *Late entry: July publication, received in August 2000.*

Ashley, Mike, ed. **The Mammoth Book of Locked-Door Mystery and Impossible Crimes**. Foreword by David Renwick. Robinson, ISBN 1-84119-129-9, xii+532pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Crime-fiction anthology, first edition; although it doesn't really fall within our remit, this features work by a number of familiar sf and fantasy names, containing as it does a mix of new and reprint stories by Lawrence Sanders, John Dickson Carr, Jacques Futrelle, Peter T. Garratt, Lois H. Gresh & Robert Weinberg, Edward D. Hoch, H. R. F. Keating, Michael Kurland, Peter Lovejoy, Richard A. Lupoff, Amy Myers, Melville Davison, Bill Pronzini, Frank M. Robinson, Peter Tremayne and others; as usual, Mike Ashley – a most conscientious and bibliographically-aware anthologist – has gone out of his way to include some unfamiliar material; recommended.) *28th September 2000.*

Ballard, J. G. **Super-Cannes**. Flamingo, ISBN 0-00-225847-1, 392pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Non-sf [but near-sf] novel by a leading sf writer, first edition; set in the south of France, in a hi-tech business park in the hills above Cannes, it's cast in the form of a psychological thriller; as we said of his previous novel, *Cocaine Nights* [1996], Ballard "may no longer be writing what the world regards as sf, but it's clear, in novels such as this and his last, *Rushing to Paradise* [1994], that his is still a fiction which operates on the utopian-dystopian axis which is at the heart of sf"; the author will turn 70 in November 2000; early reviews of this new novel have all been favourable, especially the one on BBC Radio 4 [Saturday 2nd September 2000], which had three critics praising the book; one of them, Peter Kemp, made a nice point about *Super-Cannes* being an updated Gothic Romance – young woman in peril, evil "aristocrats", sinister servants, Southern European setting, looming architecture... all brought bang up to date; JGB meets Mrs Radcliffe!) *11th September 2000.*

Banks, Iain M. **Look to Windward**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-969-5, 357pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a new "Culture" novel, described by its publishers as "ferociously intelligent, wildly original and hugely enjoyable.") *24th August 2000.*

Barclay, James. **Dawnthief**. "Chronicles of the Raven, Book One." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-860-4, 527pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1999; a debut novel by a new British writer, born 1965; Maggie Furey, Stan Nicholls and others commend it.) *Late entry: 3rd July publication, received in August 2000.*

Barclay, James. **Noonshade: Chronicles of the Raven, Book Two**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06895-7, 484pp, C-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; David Langford is quoted as describing the first book in the series as "a breathless action-crammed fantasy thriller.") *Late entry: 20th July publication, received in August 2000.*

Baxter, Stephen. **Reality Dust**. Introduction by Greg Bear. PS Publishing [98 High Ash Drive, Leeds LS17 8RE], ISBN 1-902880-10-2, 67pp, trade paperback, cover by David A. Hardy, £8. (Sf novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £25 [not seen]; a signed edition, limited to 300 numbered paperback copies and 200 numbered hardcover copies; this is one of a second quartet of original novellas from PS Publishing, which, we are promised, will be mainly of rather than horror or dark fantasy [as were the first four].) *No date shown: received in August 2000.*

Blom, Suzanne Allés. **Inca: The Scarlet Fringe**. Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-87434-0, 352pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Alternate-history sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; set in a timeline where the Spanish conquest of Peru failed, this appears to be a debut novel by a new American writer; it's also billed as the first in a series.) *October 2000.*

Brom. **Darkwerks: The Art of Brom**. Foreword by Rick Berry. Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-88585-836-3, 128pp, large-format paperback, cover by Brom, £14.99. (Fantasy art portfolio, first published in the USA, 1997; a lavish selection of the highly imaginative, often horrifying, frequently erotic and sometimes witty work of this American painter – a much "artier" artist than, e.g. Boris Vallejo and Julie Bell [see below; recommended].) *No date shown: received in August 2000.*

Brooks, Terry. **Ilse Witch: The Voyage of the Jerle Shannara, Book One**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-

345-39654-5, 454pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Stone, \$26.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; after dallying in the "weird tales" realm with his last trilogy [Running with the Demon, etc], Brooks returns to the sort of thing he's best known for – Big Commercial Fantasy [indeed, he was virtually the inventor of BCF, with his first bestseller, *The Sword of Shannara* (1977)]; this one involves "a perilous journey to distant lands and strange magics aboard the wondrous airship known as the *Jerle Shannara*.") *5th September 2000.*

Brunner, John. **The Jagged Orbit**. "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07052-8, 397pp, C-format paperback, £10.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1969; according to the blurb, "John Brunner's brilliant and scathing vision of a society disintegrating under the impact of violence, drugs, high-level corruption and the casual institutionalization of the 'insane' was a powerful and important statement in 1969; it remains a compelling and chilling tour de force three decades on.") *24th August 2000.*

Campbell, Ramsey. **Silent Children**. Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-87056-6, 352pp, hardcover, cover by David Seelye, \$24.95. (Horror novel, first edition; reviewed by David Mathew in this issue of *Interzone*; the much-praised Ramsey Campbell is Britain's leading horror writer but, like his previous novel, *The Last Voice They Hear* [1998], this new book is published in America only; thus prophets are without honour in their own backyards...) *Late entry: 13th July publication, received in August 2000.*

Carroll, Jonathan. **The Marriage of Sticks**. Indigo, ISBN 0-575-40249-0, 282pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1999; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 148.) *10th August 2000.*

Carroll, Jonathan. **Kissing the Beehive**. Indigo, ISBN 0-575-40291-1, 251pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1998; reviewed by Peter Crowther in *Interzone* 132.) *10th August 2000.*

Chetwynd-Hayes, R. **Phantoms and Fiends**. Edited by Stephen Jones. Foreword by Charles Grant. Hale, ISBN 0-7090-6724-0, 352pp, hardcover, cover by Edward Miller, £17.99. (Horror collection, first edition; it contains 21 previously-uncollected stories, drawn from this British author's nearly 40 years of writing, two of which are previously unpublished.) *August 2000.*

Claeys, Gregory, ed. **Restoration and Augustan British Utopias**. Syracuse University Press [621 Skyscraper Rd., Suite 110, Syracuse, NY 13244-5290, USA], ISBN 0-8156-2824-2, xxviii+271pp, trade paperback, \$45. (Anthology of 17th-century utopian fictions, first edition; it's a large-format soft-back with double-columned pages, containing eight texts first published in England between about 1660 and 1700, most of them are rare, although two – Margaret Cavendish's "The Blazing World" and Henry Neville's "The Isle of Pines" – have been anthologized elsewhere in recent decades, more than once; it is for the remaining six pieces, and its scholarly introduction, that the book is most valuable – and especially, perhaps, for the lengthy continuation of Francis Bacon's unfinished "New Atlantis"; by "R.H.," [thought to be one Richard Hawkins], which perhaps qualifies as the earliest "sequel-by-another-hand" in the field of proto-science fiction; the remaining pieces, by such authors as John Bellers and Francis Lee, are obscure to us; this book may look dull to the average modern reader, but it's highly recommended to those with a serious interest in the very real utopian roots of sf.) *No date shown: received in August 2000.*

Clarke, Arthur C., and Stephen Baxter. **The Light of Other Days**. Voyager, ISBN 0-345-224704-6, 312pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Stone & Bob Warner, £17.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 2000; it looks as though it has been written mainly by Baxter – who may well be Clarke's ideal "collaborator" – and it's dedicated "To Bob Shaw," who wrote a famous short story of the same title in the 1960s.) 18th September 2000.

Clemens, James. **Witch War**. "Book Three of The Banned and the Bonified." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-41709-7, 547pp, trade paperback, cover by Alan Pollack, \$15. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "James Clemens" would appear to be a pseudonym of California-resident Jim Czajkowski, in whose name the book is copyrighted; and he also told that he wrote "the bestselling novel *Subterranean*... under the pseudonym James Rollins.") Late entry: 5th July publication, received in August 2000.

Cox, Michael. **Horror Stories**. Illustrated by Michael Tickner. "Top Ten" Scholastic/Hippo, ISBN 0-439-01438-7, 224pp, B-format paperback, cover by Tickner, £3.99. (Juvenile horror/humour compendium, first edition; not, as it might at first appear, an anthology called "Top Ten Horror Stories" edited by Michael Cox, but rather a humour book by Cox and Tickner which discusses ten famous stories – *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *The Monkey's Paw*, etc. – as well as a whole range of scary fictional persons and creatures, and spins jokes, sketches, cartoons, etc. around them; it's one of a series of similar "Top Ten" books, none of which we have seen; other titles, by various authors and artists, include *Greek Legends*, *Arthurian Legends* and *Fairy Stories*.) Late entry: 21st July publication, received in August 2000.

Darvill-Evans, Peter. **Independence Day**. "Doctor Who." BBC Worldwide, 0-563-53804-X, 285pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (SF TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Seventh Doctor and Ace; the author is the former editor of the now-defunct Virgin Books Doctor Who spinoff series.) September (7) 2000.

Del Rey, Lester. **The Best of Lester del Rey**. Introductions by Terry Brooks and Frederik Pohl. Del Rey/Impac, ISBN 0-345-43949-X, xx+294pp, trade paperback, cover by Istvan Orosz, \$12. (SF collection, first published in the USA, 1978; the Terry Brooks intro is new to this edition; it contains 16 old stories, from the late 1930s to the early 1960s, including the famously sexist "Helen O'Loey," by the man who left his name [a made-up name, as we now know] on a book-publishing imprint – "Del Rey Books," formerly Ballantine Books, began publishing in 1977.) Late entry: 6th June publication, received in August 2000.

Delasara, Jan. **PopLit, PopCult and The X-Files: A Critical Exploration**. McFarland [Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640, USA], ISBN 0-7864-0789-1, v+247pp, trade paperback, \$39.95 [USA], £32 [UK]. (Critical study of the *s/f* horror TV series *The X-Files* and its wider relevance to the present day; first edition; sterling-price import copies are available in Britain from Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns, Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; the author is described as "a professor of English at Metropolitan State College in Denver, Colorado, where she also teaches classes in film history and horror literature.") In the USA, October 2000; in the UK, 23rd October 2000.

Erskine, Barbara. **Whispers in the Sand**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-225784-X, 402pp, hardcover, cover by Kevin Tweddell, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; perhaps better

described as a "supernatural romance" than a horror novel, this is a new Egyptological tale by the popular British author of such fantasy-tinged bestsellers as *Lady of Hov* ["which has sold well over a million copies worldwide"], *Midnight* is a *Lovely Place*, *House of Echoes* and *On the Edge of Darkness*.) 18th September 2000.

Feist, Raymond E. **Krondor: The Assassins: Book II of The Riftwar Legacy**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648335-6, 352pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £5.99. (Fantasy computer-game novelization, first edition; an outgrowth of the games *Betrayal at Krondor* and *Return to Krondor*, published by Dynamix, Inc.) 4th September 2000.

Friedman, Michael Jan. **Shadows of the Past. "X-Men."** Simon & Schuster/BP Books, ISBN 0-7434-0018-6, 328pp, hardcover, cover by Steranko, £14.99. (SF/fantasy comic-book spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2000; this is the American edition of June 2000, with a UK price and publication date specified; it's based on the Marvel Comics *X-Men* series, and published to coincide with the recent big-screen movie.) 20th August 2000.

Gemmell, David A. **Hero in the Shadows**. "Waylander stalks an ancient evil." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14674-9, 446pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Bolton, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000; a follow-up to Gemmell's earlier "*Drenaln Saga*.") 12th October 2000.

Gibson, William. **All Tomorrow's Parties**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-026613-5, 278pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1999; set in the same future world as the author's previous two novels, *Virtual Light* and *Idoru*; reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 151.) 5th October 2000.

Goodkind, Terry. **Faith of the Fallen**. "A Sword of Truth Novel." Tor, ISBN 0-312-86786-7, 539pp, hardcover, cover by Keith Parkinson, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; Book Six of the seemingly-unending "Sword of Truth" series.) 22nd August 2000.

Goodkind, Terry. **Faith of the Fallen**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07081-1, 539pp, hardcover, cover by Keith Parkinson, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; this is Book Six of "The Sword of Truth" although it does not state as much on the front cover or title page.) 24th August 2000.

Gray, Julia. **The Dark Moon: Book One of The Guardian Cycle**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-

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The Art of Brom



993-8, 536pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "Julia Gray," we were told when her first book, *Ice Moge*, came out in 1998, is "the pseudonym of an author whose previous novels have sold over 300,000 copies"; rumour has it that she is really Mark and Julia Smith, who previously wrote as "Jonathan Wylie.") 7th September 2000.

Hamilton, Laurell K. **Guilty Pleasures: An Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter Novel**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-046-6, 266pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £5.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1993; the opening book in an engaging dark fantasy/crime crossover series which originally came out in America as an Ace Books paperback-original series.) 7th September 2000.

Hamilton, Laurell K. **A Kiss of Shadows**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-42339-9, 435pp, hardcover, £22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the publishers describe Laurell Hamilton as "one of the hottest rising stars of dark fantasy and erotic horror"; hitherto best known for her "Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter" series, she begins a new series with this book, featuring "a completely different kind of heroine: a Faerie princess in the modern world.") 3rd October 2000.

Hamilton, Laurell K. **The Laughing Corpse: An Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter Novel**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-047-4, 293pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £5.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994; second in the crime/dark fantasy series which apparently has become quite a bestseller in America.) 7th September 2000.

Hamilton, Peter F. **Watching Trees Grow**. Introduction by Larry Niven. PS Publishing [98 High Ash Drive, Leeds LS17 8RE], ISBN 1-902880-14-5, 96pp, trade paperback, cover by David A. Hardy, £8. (SF novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £25 [not seen]; a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 300 numbered hardcover copies; this is one of a second quartet of original novellas from PS Publishing.) No date shown: received in August 2000.

Hannan, Noel K. **Shenanigans**. Introduction by Ian Watson. Illustrated by various hands. Penlagan Press [PO Box 12, Maesteg, Mid-Glamorgan CF34 0XG], ISBN 0-9538598-0-0, 248pp, trade paperback, cover by Frazer Alex Irving, £6.99. (SF collection, first edition; it contains 13 stories by one of the newer British writers [born 1967], mostly reprinted from various small-press venues; note: this is much the largest of the several UK small-press publications listed here [see the PS Publishing titles under Baxter, Hamilton, Leebon and McDonald, and the Alchemy Press title under Newman], and yet it is also by far the most modestly priced; it is quite nicely produced, too; the publisher, who lives in Wales, is Christopher Teague.) 8th September 2000.

Harrison, Harry. **Stars and Stripes in Peril: Stars and Stripes Trilogy, Book Two**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-68920-X, 330pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Alternative-world SF novel, first published in the UK, 2000; second in the trilogy about a 19th-century war-which-never-happened between Britain and the USA.) 21st September 2000.

Harry, Eric L. **Invasion**. "China is the new world power and she wants to prove it." Coronet, ISBN 0-340-72901-5, 572pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Near-future war novel, first published in





the USA, 2000; the author is American and has published three previous books; like most such futuristic military thrillers, it's pitched at the mainstream market, even if the subject matter seems essentially similar to that of Robert A. Heinlein's old sf pot-boiler, *Six Columns* – i.e. a threatened Asiatic invasion of the USA.) 7th September 2000.

Heinlein, Robert A. **The Door Into Summer.** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07054-4, 190pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1957; another welcome reissue of the late RAH's most genial novel – one for the cat-lovers, and for all those who like a time-twisting tale.) 24th August 2000.

Herbert, Brian, and Kevin J. Anderson. **House Harkonnen: Prelude to Dune II.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-75177-0, viii+626pp, hardcover, cover by Gerry Grace, £17.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 2000; the second volume of a trilogy which prequelizes [fine word] the late Frank Herbert's bestselling novel *Dune* [1965]; Brian Herbert is the original author's son; presumably the more experienced Kevin J. Anderson has done most of the writing here.) 7th September 2000.

Holland, Cecelia. **The Angel and the Sword.** Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-86890-1, 304pp, hardcover, £23.95. (Historical novel, first edition; proof copy received; "based on a traditional French legend, the story of Roderick the Bearded," this is probably startling historical fiction rather than fantasy – but it has been sent to Interzone for review.) December 2000.

Howard, Robert E. **The Conan Chronicles, Volume 1: The People of the Black Circle.** Edited by Stephen Jones. "Fantasy Masterworks, B." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-996-1, xii+548pp, B-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £6.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition in this form; it consists of approximately half of the 21 "Conan" stories Howard wrote, with the texts reproduced in the original form, and here rearranged in internal chronological order; this is perhaps the most attractive repackaging of these old pulp stories yet in paperback format.) 10th August 2000.

Jordan, Robert, and Teresa Patterson. **The World of Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-054-7, 304pp, large-format paperback, cover by Tom Canty, £12.99. (Copiously illustrated companion to the series of fantasy novels by Jordan; first published in the USA, 1997, the artwork is by Todd Cameron Hamilton, John M. Ford, Tom Canty, Darrell K. Sweet and others; this is a Bill Fawcett & Associates packaged book; "Robert Jordan" is a pseudonym of James Rigney, Jr.) 7th September 2000.

Lackey, Mercedes, and Larry Dixon. **Owlknigh.** Illustrated by Dixon. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07091-9, 326pp, hardcover, cover by Jon Sullivan, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; sequel to *Owlflight* and *Owlright*, and part of the larger "Valdemar" series.) 24th August 2000.

Lansdale, Joe R. **High Cotton: Selected Stories.** Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd, Urbana, IL 61802, USA], ISBN 0-9655901-2-7, xii+267pp, hardcover, cover by J. K. Potter, £23.95. (Horror/Fantasy collection, first edition; the 21 "best" stories, "for mature audiences only" drawn from Lansdale's 27 years of writing; another handsome Golden Gryphon volume, done in their usual style which closely resembles that of Arkham House during the years of the late Jim Turner's editorship.) September 2000.

Lebbon, Tim. **Naming of Parts.** Introduction by Steve Rassic Tem. PS Publishing [98 High Ash Drive, Leeds LS17 8RE], ISBN 1-902880-16-X, 80pp, trade paperback, cover by Alan M. Clark, £8. (Horror novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £25 [not seen]; a signed edition, limited to 300 numbered paperback copies and 200 numbered hardcover copies; this may be the first of a third quartet of original novellas from PS Publishing.) No date shown: received in August 2000.

Leonard, Paul. **The Turing Test.** "Doctor Who." BBC Worldwide, 0-563-53806-6, 245pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor; set during World War II, it also features guest appearances by such real-life characters as mathematician Alan Turing and novelist Graham Greene.) 2nd October 2000.

Lovecraft, H. P. **Lord of a Visible World.** Edited by A. T. Joshi and David E. Schultz. Ohio University Press [Scott Quadrangle, Athens, OH 45701, USA], ISBN 0-8214-1332-5, xix+385pp, hardcover, cover by Gary Gore, \$49.95. (Autobiography pieced together from horror writer H. P. Lovecraft's letters, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at \$24.95 [not seen]; Lovecraft [1890-1937] was an extremely prolific letter-writer – the total wordage of his extant letters far exceeds that of his fiction – so there was plenty of material to draw upon; this looks like a rather fascinating book, and a great labour of love on the part of Messrs Joshi and Schultz; recommended.) 31st August 2000.

Lumley, Brian. **Necroscope: Defilers.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-79245-0, 446pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, £17.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 2000; a follow-up to *Necroscope: Invaders* [1999] in this ever-extending pulp-style adventure-horror series by a British writer whose books "have sold well in excess of two million copies.") 7th September 2000.

McDevitt, Jack. **Slow Lightning.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648396-8, 540pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA as *Infinity Beach*, 2000; it comes with an encomium from Stephen King, addressed to the general reader, in which he says, "You're going to love it even if you think you don't like science fiction.") 4th September 2000.

McDonald, Ian. **Tendeleo's Story.** Introduction by Robert Silverberg. PS Publishing [98 High Ash Drive, Leeds LS17 8RE], ISBN 1-902880-12-9, 91pp, trade paperback, cover by David A. Hardy, £8. (Sf novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £25 [not seen]; a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 300 numbered hardcover copies; this is one of a second quartet of original novellas from PS Publishing; it's a sequel to McDonald's "Chaga" novella.) No date shown: received in August 2000.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **Scion of Cyador.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87379-4, 541pp, hardcover, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the eleventh "Reduce" novel, and the immediate follow-up to *Mogli of Cyador* – which came out only six months ago; the over-prolific Modesitt, who has a technical background and has also written much sf, has a reputation for being at the comparatively hard-edged, scientifically-minded end of the Big Commercial Fantasy field.) 22nd September 2000.

Mosley, Walter. **Blue Light: A Novel.** Serpent's Tail, ISBN 1-85242-733-7, 296pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA,

1998; the author is a well-known crime novelist, and this was his first foray into sf; it's set in California.) 7th September 2000.

Newman, Kim. **Where the Bodies Are Buried.** Introduction by Peter Atkins. Illustrated by Randy Broecker. Alchemy Press [46 Oxford Rd., Acorns Green, Birmingham B27 6DT], ISBN 1-9532260-2-6, 144pp, hardcover, cover by Sylvia Starshine, £17.50. (Horror collection, first edition; a signed, limited edition of 500 copies; it contains four linked stories, "Where the Bodies Are Buried," "Where the Bodies Are Buried II: Sequel Hook," "Where the Bodies Are Buried 3: Black and White and Red All Over," and "Where the Bodies Are Buried 2020"; all are reprinted from the *Dark Voices/Dark Terrors* anthology series edited by Stephen Jones, 1993-1996; good fun, in Newman's best horror-comic vein.) Late entry: June publication, received in August 2000.

Norton, Andre, and Sasha Miller. **To the King a Daughter: The Book of the Oak.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87336-0, 320pp, hardcover, cover by Royo, £23.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; described on the jacket flap as "Volume One of the Cycle of Oak, Yew, Ash, and Rowan"; although billed as a collaboration, this is probably a more of a sharecrop [i.e. largely written by the junior partner, Sasha Miller] – Andre Norton, whose first novel appeared in 1934, is getting very elderly.) 13th September 2000.

Parker, Mark F. **X-Calibre: The Absurd Legend of Cantiger the Wizard.** Robinson, ISBN 1-84119-106-X, 316pp, B-format paperback, cover by Julek Heller, £6.99. (Humorous Arthurian fantasy novel, first edition; it bears a second subtitle: "The first book of the world-renowned, hitherto unknown Orsonian Legends"; a debut fantasy by an author who has written some 20 TV novelizations.) 24th August 2000.

Pratchett, Terry. **The Gods Trilogy.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07036-6, 758pp, hardcover, cover by Josh Kirby, £16.99. (Humorous fantasy omnibus, first edition; it contains three novels, all in the celebrated "Discworld" series: *Pyramids*, *Small Gods* and *Hogfather*, first published in the UK in 1989, 1992 and 1996; as with the several previous Gollancz-Pratchett omnibuses, this is good value for money.) Late entry: 20th July publication, received in August 2000.

Pratchett, Terry. **The Truth.** Doubleday, ISBN 0-385-60102-6, 319pp, hardcover, cover by Josh Kirby, no price shown. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the 25th "Discworld" novel, it is about the misadventures of "William de Worde, the editor of the Discworld's first newspaper, [who] just wants to get at the truth.") November 2000.

Roberts, Adam. **Salt.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-57506-896-5, 248pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; there may be a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; a debut novel by the 30-something [either 33 or 35, depending on whether you believe the publicity letter or the book's back-flap blurb] British academic author of the recent book *Science Fiction in the "New Critical Idiom"* series [Routledge, 2000]; Peter F. Hamilton commends it on the cover, and the publishers talk of the novel's "remarkable power, intense beauty and profound insight.") Late entry: 20th July publication, received in August 2000.

Rusch, Kristine Kathryn, and Dean Wesley Smith. **X-Men.** "Now a major blockbuster from Twentieth Century Fox." Pocket, ISBN 0-7434-0398-3, 239pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy movie novelization, first published in the USA, 2000; based on the film script by Christopher McQuarrie

and Ed Solomon, which in turn is based on a Marvel Comics comic-book series.) 7th August 2000.

Russo, Richard Paul. **Terminal Victims**. Introduction by Karen Joy Fowler. Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802, USA], ISBN 0-9655901-3-S, xi+237pp, hardcover, cover by Nicholas Jainschig, \$23.95. (SF collection, first edition; the Philip K. Dick Award-winning author's first collection, it contains 14 stories reprinted from Asimov's, F&SF and elsewhere; yet another handsome Golden Gryphon volume, published simultaneously with the Joe Lansdale collection [see above].) September 2000.

Salis, James. **Time's Hammers: The Collected Short Fiction of James Salis**. Toxic [CT Publishing, PO Box 5880, Birmingham B16 8JF], ISBN 1-902002-28-8, 396pp, B-format paperback, £9.99. (SF/fantasy/mainstream collection, first edition [?]; it states on the reverse of the title page: "The text of this edition has been fully revised by the author," implying that there may have been an earlier American edition – or perhaps they simply mean that the stories have been revised since their original magazine or anthology appearances; Salis has been writing, for the most part obscurely [although his stock seems to have risen enormously in the past decade], for more than 30 years; this book contains several dozen rather skinny stories, divided internally into two "volumes," and reprinted from a wide range of sources – *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *F&SF*, *Gollery*, *The Georgia Review*, *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine*, *New Worlds*, *Orbit*, etc.; etc.; it comes with jacket commendations from Harlan Ellison and Ian Sinclair.) October 2000.

Shippey, T. A. J. R. R. Tolkien: **Author of the Century**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-261-10400-4, xxxiv+347pp, hardcover, cover by Tolkien, £16.99. (Critical study of Tolkien's fantasy writings, first edition; the author's name is given as Tom Shippey on the cover and spine [but not on the title page]; a follow-up to his excellent book, *The Road to Middle-earth* [1982; revised 1992]; as in that earlier work, Professor Shippey places Tolkien's fantasies in their 19th-century "philological" context as well as in a wider context of 20th-century imaginative literature; a stimulating, forcefully-argued book, highly recommended.) 4th September 2000.

Siegel, Jan. **Prospero's Children**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-651280-1, xviii+331pp, A-format paperback, cover by the Alan Lee, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1999; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 152; "Jan Siegel" is a pseudonym of Amanda Hemingway [born 1955], who wrote the sf novel *Psyche* [1982].) 4th September 2000.

Stapledon, Olaf. **Sirius: A Fantasy of Love and Discord**. "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07057-9, 200pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (SF novel, first published in the UK, 1944; about a super-intelligent dog; although by no means his most cosmic vision, this has some claim to being Stapledon's best novel – certainly, it moved this reader near to tears when he first read it many years ago.) 24th August 2000.

Stevenson, Caroline. **When the King Comes Home**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-88214-3, 236pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is the first novel by this author we have seen since *A College of Magics* [1994] – although she published several earlier books such as *The Serpent's Egg* [1988] and *River Rats* [1992].) November 2000.

Strugatsky, Arkady and Boris. **Roadside Picnic**. Translated by Antonina W. Bouis. Introduction by November 2000

Theodore Sturgeon. "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07053-6, xi+145pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (SF novel, first published in Russia, 1972; this translation first published in the USA, 1977; perhaps the most enduring of the Strugatsky Brothers' novels – in English, at any rate; it formed the basis of Andrei Tarkovsky's very strange film, *Stalker*.) 24th August 2000.

Tolkien, J. R. R. **The Lord of the Rings**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-710500-2, xix+283+253+252+189+197+182+180pp, seven-volume boxed set in A-format paperback, covers by the author, £25. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK in three volumes, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*, 1954-55; to the best of our knowledge, this is the first time it has been split into seven short volumes – i.e. the six "Books" of Tolkien's original devising, plus a volume devoted entirely to the appendices; it seems there is no end in sight to the repackagings of this ever-popular work.) 4th September 2000.

Turtledove, Harry. **The Great War: Breakthroughs**. "An alternate history of the War to End All Wars." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-40563-3, 486pp, hardcover, cover by George Pratt, \$26. (Alternate-history sf novel, first edition; sequel to *The Great War: American Front* [1998] and *The Great War: Walk in Hell* [1999] in an ongoing tetralogy [not to be confused with all Turtledove's other tetralogies] about a First World War which went differently from the one familiar to us (timeline.) 1st August 2000.

Vallejo, Boris, and Julie Bell. **Titans: The Heroic Visions of Boris Vallejo and Julie Bell**. Text by Nigel Suckling. "Featuring X-Men, Spiderman, Spiderwoman, Silver Surfer, The Hulk." Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-850-9, 160pp, large-format hardcover, cover by Julie Bell, £20. (SF/fantasy art portfolio, first edition, containing over 170 full-colour pictures, with minimal text, it's described as "the complete collection of paintings of the Marvel Comics heroes" by this popular husband-and-wife team of body-building artists – whose work is highly appropriate to the Age of Schwarzenegger, we suppose.) 28th September 2000.

Walton, Jo. **The King's Peace**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87229-1, 416pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut novel by a writer who lives in Wales; it comes with commendations from Poul Anderson, "Robin Hobb" and Ken MacLeod, the last-named states: "It reads like a lost memoir from the Dark Age of a subtly different history, tough and unsentimental and all the more touching for that.") October 2000.

Weiss, Margaret, and Tracy Hickman. **Well of Darkness: The Sovereign Stone Trilogy, Book 1**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224746-1, 450pp, hardcover, cover by Martin McKenna, £16.99. (Fantasy game spinoff novel, first published in the USA [?], 2000; according to an acknowledgment note, it's based on a world created by the artist Larry Elmore which has also inspired a role-playing game devised by Lester Smith and Don Perrin.) 21st August 2000.

Wheat, Leonard F. **Kubrick's 2001: A Triple Allegory**. Scarcecrow Press [4720 Boston Way, Lanham, MD 20706, USA], ISBN 0-8108-3796-X, vi+181pp, hardcover, £26. (Critical study of the famous Kubrick-and-Clarke sf movie, 2001: *A Space Odyssey* [1968]; first published in the USA, 2000; this sterling-priced import of the US first edition is available in Britain from Shelving Ltd, 4 Playfield Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; the author [born 1931] is "a retired economist," with a PhD from Harvard University; interestingly, in

his thoroughgoing attempt to explicate the film, he stresses the importance not only of Homer's *Odyssey*, but also of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.) 19th October 2000.

Williams, Billy Dee, and Rob MacGregor. **Willams**. Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-87271-2, 317pp, hardcover, cover by Cliff Nielsen, \$22.95. (Horror/crime novel, first edition; described as "a psychic thriller," this is a follow-up to an earlier book by the same authors, *PSI/Net* [1999], which we don't recall seeing or hearing tell of; Billy Dee Williams is a well-known actor, and Rob MacGregor [who presumably has done most of the writing here] is a crime novelist and author of a series of George Lucas-franchised "Indiana Jones" spinoff novels.) 9th August 2000.

Williams, Tad. **Mountain of Black Glass: Otherland, Volume Three**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-990-3, xxxiii+924pp, A-format paperback, cover by Michael Whelan, £7.99. (SF/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; follow-up to *City of Golden Shadow* [1997] and *River of Blue Fire* [1998], in this very large virtual-real tetralogy.) 21st September 2000.

Wilson, Robert Charles. **Bios**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85788-737-3, 218pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £5.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1999; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 151.) 10th August 2000.

Wilson, Robert Charles. **The Perseids and Other Stories**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87374-3, 224pp, hardcover, cover by Stephan Martiniere, \$22.95. (SF collection, first edition; the American-born, Canadian-resident author's first published gathering of shorter work, it contains nine stories and an afterword – five of the stories are reprinted from original anthologies and three are previously unpublished [does this guy never submit to magazines? – a pity!]) 21st August 2000.

Winter, Douglas E., ed. **Dark Visions**. Indigo, ISBN 0-575-40290-3, 381pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror anthology, first published in the USA as *Night Visions* 5, 1988; it contains three stories apiece by Stephen King and Dan Simmons, and a novella by George R. R. Martin – all of whose names feature prominently on cover and spine.) 10th August 2000.

Wooding, Chris. **Broken Sky, Part Six**. Scholastic, ISBN 0-439-01492-1, 219pp, B-format paperback, cover by Steve Kyte, £3.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; the latest part of a "serial novel," each episode of which carries no separate title, "Look out for Part 7," says the back cover – but we are not told at what frequency the episodes are appearing; we assume all the parts are by Chris Wooding, who seems to be a very prolific as well as a very young author [born 1977]; in addition to the previous five parts of this saga, he has published at least four other novels in the past two years.) Late entry: 21st July publication, received in August 2000.

Yaco, Link, and Karen Haber. **The Science of the X-Men**. "The official guide to the scientific reality of the mutant world!" Simon & Schuster/BP Books, ISBN 0-7434-0020-8, xiii+274pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Illustrated comic-book spinoff-cum-pop science text, first published in the USA, 2000; this is the American edition of June 2000, with a UK price and publication date specified; at first glance, it looks as though it may be a seriously-intended popular-science text, like the various "Science of Star Trek" books, but on closer perusal it actually seems to be more of a guide to the fantastic characters in the Marvel Comics X-Men series, published to coincide with the recent big-screen movie.) 17th September 2000.





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